

Prologue: Vengeance

On a moonless night in a sparsely populated, run-down neighborhood in London, the shadows seemed to take upon a life of their own. Every small movement, every sharp noise, every flicker from the poorly-maintained streetlights set one's pulse racing. There was no sign of life on the streets; the windows of the few battered and derelict houses were dark. But one still feared the dangers that might lurk unseen in the alleyways, ready to ambush any unsuspecting passerby.

With a soft 'pop' of displaced air, a solitary figure appeared on a deserted street corner. He wore hooded black robes, clothing quite unusual for a normal traveler in the heart of Muggle London. But this man was far from normal.

Despite his plain clothing, he was quite wealthy. His family owned one of the largest accounts in Gringotts Wizarding Bank. His face was not unknown, and his picture appeared in the *Daily Prophet* from time to time beside an article about the man's generous donations to various good causes, from St. Mungo's to the Foreign Wizards Education Fund. To all appearances, Thomas Wagner Avery, a middle-aged man considered one of the most influential and powerful purebloods in Wizarding Britain, was a model citizen, a well-intentioned philanthropist, and a man as loyal to the order and stability represented by Cornelius Fudge's Ministry of Magic as any that could be found.

But this well-built man of fair complexion and thinning brown hair, with blue eyes that could make him appear as harmless and benevolent as a loving grandfather, and as sharp and dangerous as the most discerning politician, was, in fact, a trained and practiced killer.

Following in the footsteps of his father, at seventeen Thomas Avery had sworn allegiance to the most powerful Dark Wizard of modern times. A man whom had been in the midst of a slow and steady rise to power when he had received the loyalty and services of Avery: Lord Voldemort had welcomed him into the growing ranks of his hooded and masked followers: The Death Eaters. The young man had been Marked with the sign of this new Lord, a blackened

impression of a serpent emerging from the mouth of a skull that was permanently seared into his very flesh. Thomas Avery had served Lord Voldemort with distinction for over a decade, all while maintaining the public image of a determined and intelligent young man who flawlessly took over his family after the tragic death of his father. That the man had been killed in a botched kidnapping of a foreign dignitary remained mostly unknown. Lord Voldemort's tendrils of power and influence extended throughout the world, and he easily arranged for the body to be 'lost' before it could be positively identified.

Thomas Avery was no benevolent grandfather once he donned the jet black robes and white mask of the Death Eaters. He was a ruthless and skilled assassin, torturer, and interrogator. His skill lay not in raw ability or superior reflexes, but rigorous self-discipline and a creative mind that could turn a spell as harmless as the Bubble-Head Charm into a cruel, merciless, and untraceable form of execution.

But on this night, the man was forced to calm the rapid beating of his heart and he frantically searched for the comrade that was supposed to have been waiting for him. He did not know the identity of his contact, only that he or she had been sent from the Dark Lord with special instructions for one of his most trusted Death Eaters. He came only because he had taken steps to determine the authenticity of his 'comrade.' He or she possessed a Dark Mark, and there were no live traitors in the Dark Lord's forces. There were *many* dead ones.

Finally, as thoughts of leaving and reconfirming the meeting's time and place entered his mind, he heard a faint sound, and a figure materialized on the opposite side of the street. It was a woman, tall, her features hidden by the hood of her robes. Thomas stepped forward expectantly.

"I bring greetings from the Dark Lord, Avery," the woman spoke. The voice was strangely familiar, but he simply could not place it. It was no matter. The Dark Lord had hundreds of servants, and many of them did not live in England. Some were Marked, others were not, and their loyalty was ensured by the near-endless supplies of gold

that his Master had access to. That he did not immediately recognize the woman was not any reason to panic.

Avery tried to meet her eyes, but they were invisible beneath the cowl of the woman's robes. She moved forward confidently, though slightly tense. Avery was no Legilimens, and had no way of knowing if the woman's intent was malicious or not. *I can always Apparate away if I am uncertain. If I am mistaken, I can simply explain that I have a great deal to lose if captured by an undercover Auror.*

"May he rule over the land and reap vengeance upon his enemies," Avery replied with the standard greeting. "May he triumph always."

"Indeed," the woman replied. Avery pulled down the hood of his cloak, in the hope that she might do the same. She did not, and, in fact, stiffened almost imperceptibly at the sight of his face. *Perhaps my reputation precedes me.*

"What news have you brought me?" Avery asked. He supposed he was being a bit forward, but this impromptu meeting on this deserted street in a poor part of Muggle London unsettled him.

"Only this," she said, taking an abrupt step forward, a cold-blooded rage entering her voice, a tone that sent shivers down Avery's spine. But that was nothing compared to the content of the *message*. "He fears that he regret the loss of your services."

Before Avery could react to her statement, the woman was in motion. Her wand was in her hand in the flick of a wrist, and as she moved, she shrugged back the hood of her robes. The face that met the eyes of the hardened Death Eater chilled his blood. It was a face well-known to Avery; he had played a role in carving the two vicious scars that marred her face. One from the right side of her forehead, through her right eye, down to her cheek. Another starting on the left side of her chin and vanishing beneath her robes, though Avery knew that his partially deflected Slicing Curse had nearly cut her left breast open.

Shoulder-length honey-blond hair. Normally dulled grey-green eyes that appeared darkened by the malevolent hatred directed at her adversary. A slender frame that moved faster and with more precision

that the human body was supposed to be capable of. A mahogany wand that appeared black as it reflected the streetlights above.

Avery had few nightmares about the First War, which he mostly attributed to an unperturbed conscience. He killed for a reason, an ideal he was dedicated to. Those he killed deserved nothing less.

But the one image that would occasionally disturb his slumber was the enraged woman of twenty-one, fiery energy swarming around her, setting the very walls aflame, wandlessly casting the obscenely powerful Flesh-Shredding Curse that reduced Evan Rosier to something one would expect to see when a human was fed into a particularly malicious meat-grinder. His blood, brains, stomach fluids –*everything* – splattered the walls and his fellow Death Eaters. Avery remembered all too clearly his horrific shriek as his throat was ripped apart, his skin and muscle shredded and torn from his bones, which themselves were reduced to white chunks at a glance indistinguishable from pieces of chipped concrete.

Kathleen Travers, at the time a raw and wide-eyed recruit and the younger sister of the Travers now imprisoned in Azkaban, had it easy. An Incineration Curse to the face, leaving only a flaming pile of ash, was nothing compared to the carnage and gore that had once been Voldemort's most feared and powerful Death Eater. The Severing Curse then took off the head of another rookie Death Eater, Derek Whitecheek was similarly quick and merciful compared with the fate that befell their leader.

And so that woman that haunted his nightmares dropped into a battle crouch, her lips twisted into a predatory grin.

Daphne Artemis Dressler.

Avery didn't have time to run before the Grey Maiden's *Crucio* struck him in the midsection. Perhaps he should have expected this; it was only a matter of time. Not a man or woman remained alive who had participated in the attack on the O'Connor Sanctuary, which had turned from a simple assassination of a powerful and influential Light Family into an infamous bloodbath, at the sight of which hardened and experienced Aurors vomited or broke down in tears.

Little did we know what monster we'd had unleashed that day.

He hit the ground hard, but felt nothing of the impact. His nervous system was overloaded by the malicious pulses of magical energy. He opened his mouth and unleashed a shriek of pain, but no sound came. Daphne had Silenced him, ensuring that she could avenge her husband in relative peace.

Avery writhed. Images, some of nonsensical things, appeared in his mind's eye before shattering into nothingness. Millions of white-hot needles penetrated every inch of his skin, causing supreme agony. His blood boiled, his bones chilled. His nerves were burned out, and simply stopped functioning in places, so that he felt nothing. But the pain soon penetrated to the very core of his being, and the dead spots became irrelevant. His mind buckled under the pressure, fighting to keep its capacity for reasoned thought. It was a losing battle. When the pain vanished, Thomas's first thoughts were of how beautiful that dirty... *what's it called...* was. He lay on his back staring at the strange lights in the dark heavens, and then something blocked his view.

He didn't recognize the woman that now towered over his downed form. She raised something...*a stick?* Then she said two words, neither of which made any sense to his tattered and tormented mind. "*Avada Kedavra.*"

Thomas marveled how bright the strange bolt of green light that appeared from her stick was before it struck his chest...then he saw no more. He felt no more. His soul was set adrift, and began its slow descent into the bowels of the earth.

High above him, standing on the pavement, unrelenting eyes staring down at the corpse, Daphne repeated an occasionally altered mantra that had been running through her head from the night she'd lost her husband.

Seven down. One to go.

Her thoughts turned to Harry, and guilt threatened to overwhelm her. She'd assured him that she had changed, knowing full well that she could never change. Her life was over, had been the night that she

had taken Harry from his mother's arms. It had taken her fourteen years to realize this. She lived on only to give Harry the love and support he deserved, and to train him to meet his destiny. A destiny she doubted she would live to see fulfilled. She was a walking corpse, a woman deprived of her soul to a degree that Dementors could not hope to match. If Harry were to die, she'd probably give out, the life force leaving her as she failed her last mission. *Well, besides avenging Edmond. But I cannot survive on hatred. I need Harry's love.*

My personal revenge is not of his concern. This is my secret, my burden. Unless I deem it necessary, I will not speak of it again...though, perhaps when Antonin also lies dead, I will tell him.

Settled, she felt the urge to return to Lily's son. With a soft 'pop', she was gone.

Had she been more aware, less consumed by her own thoughts, she might have noticed the man that stepped out of concealment in the shadows of an alleyway, a man who had arrived silently just in time to see Daphne wipe the life from his old friend. The blond-haired man was somewhat shocked, but realized just how lucky he was that it hadn't been him. He'd come with a message from the Dark Lord...a message that had apparently been intercepted by the *opportunistic* Grey Maiden. Lucius Malfoy's anger simmered beneath his normally placid features.

She will pay for this. After all, an upstanding citizen such as myself can hardly allow Daphne Dressler, the unbalanced guardian of the Boy-Who-Lived, to get away with the senseless murder of Thomas Avery, old family friend of Ministry favorite Lucius Malfoy, now can he?

Lucius sneered at the empty street. *A Vow of Vengeance, Daphne? I will relish your brat's tears as the Aurors take you to the Dementors.*

Vengeance is sweet.

But he would bide his time, allowing time for a private investigation into Avery's death that was, of course, entirely needless. Then, he would be the right hand of justice, coming down to sever the Grey Maiden's head.

He Apparated away, though as he did, he was struck by a strange emotion. He would not mourn Avery's passing, but he had to admit that he would miss his old friend.

Just one more notch in that woman's belt. And it shall be the last one.

So swore Lucius Abraxas Malfoy.

Chapter 1: Correspondences

The Daily Prophet

June 28th Edition

RENOWNED PHILANTHROPIST FOUND MURDERED !

NO LEADS IN DEATH OF WELL-KNOWN PUREBLOOD!

ASSOCIATED WIZARDING PRESS

London, England

The discovery of the body of one of St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries's most generous benefactors by Muggle police has sent shockwaves through the Ministry of Magic and the wizarding community as a whole. Thomas Wagner Avery, who began making his substantial annual donations to the hospital after he was acquitted of charges of murder and torture by reason of being under the influence of the Imperius Curse, was also an honored guest at dozens of fundraising events each year.

Mr. Avery said in a 1988 interview, "After the terrible ordeal I suffered, I decided that, despite the fact that I had been legally forgiven, it did not erase the terrible things that I had done. Although I could not bring back those I was forced to kill, I could do right by their memories. I am a man of significant wealth, and I wanted to share that wealth, and perhaps to atone for my crimes. I picked St. Mungo's because it is a place where endangered lives are preserved."

Mr. Avery also made frequent donations to various charities, funded the construction of the Veteran's Center at the hospital for those still struggling to overcome their wounds, physical and mental, suffered in the war against He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named over a decade ago.

The body was discovered in a sparsely populated area of London's East End, which has raised a number of questions. No witnesses could be found to help solve the mystery of what a man such as Mr. Avery was doing in such a poor neighborhood. Head of the

Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Amelia Bones, issued a statement a few hours after the body was found, saying that a Killing Curse had been used to murder Mr. Avery. The statement also suggested that Mr. Avery's body had shown signs of torture.

Mr. Avery's wife, Electra, 47, and son, Nathan, 17, could not be reached for comment. Nathan Avery will be a Seventh Year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry this year. His sister, Lysetta, 11, is an entering First Year.

So far, there are no leads in this high-profile case, although the office of Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge has assured the media that the Department of Magical Law Enforcement is making this case its number one priority. Mr. Avery's death comes just a few months after the suspicious death of another well-known public figure, Head of the Department for International Magical Cooperation Bartemius Crouch, a crime that remains unsolved

3rd July 1995

Dressler Manor

Hampshire, England

Dear Ginny,

Yes, I did appreciate your little gift. Next time, you might consider giving me a bit more information before you send me a nondescript black box. I agonized over the decision to open it. Given a certain two individuals in your family, you can understand my caution.

As for what I've been up to, that hasn't changed. I asked Daphne to teach me to hold my own against a good Death Eater, and that's what she's trying to do. It's not so much a matter of learning new spells; the ones I'm proficient at are more than powerful enough. It's a matter of efficiency, strategy, and endurance. I've been working even harder on my physical training. Daphne employs a very aggressive dueling technique, one that's quite similar to your own, actually. But she thinks I ought to work with a more balanced technique of defense and

offense for now. That's the way Moody taught her, and if it ain't broke, don't fix it, right?

Well, my arm's pretty well healed, except for the scars. Not much I can do about them. Merlin, I'm not sure I'll ever be able to thank Neville enough. And I suppose I ought to thank Hermione too, since he found the clue that led him to investigate the healing effects of Briar's Knotweed in the book she got him for Christmas. That potion Snape brewed has sped the rate of healing four or five-fold, even if it took him over a week to actually listen to something proposed by Neville. To be fair, Neville hasn't exactly earned Snape's trust, but still...

It's really quite a relief, actually. I was frightened for a while there I might have to start all over again. Wand movements are heavily dependent on muscle memory, plus since I'm right-handed, my left hand was pretty weak.

No, I haven't been having any more dreams. My scar's burned a bit, but there haven't been any accompanying images. Voldemort's lying low right now, aggressively recruiting here and on the continent. Daphne reckons he knows that even Fudge would have to see sense if he started moving aggressively.

We might not be here for all that much longer. Daphne's not completely sure, but it's possible that someone tried to breach the wards surrounding Dressler Manor. So a move to Headquarters might be in the near future. I'm not really looking forward to it.

I really do miss you, Gin. I'm sorry we haven't been able to spend time together, but between my training and the danger that we're all in, it's probably best that you stay with your family at the Burrow. Hopefully we'll get a chance to spend some time together soon.

Haven't heard from Blaise since we got back, but that's no surprise; he doesn't strike me as much of a letter writer. Luna's sent me some riddles, but I can't make the slightest sense of them. I'm starting to wonder if she doesn't even want me to actually find solutions to them. She's like that. She's really special, Gin, even I can't tell you exactly how without betraying her confidence. Just trust me when I say that

she isn't half as crazy as she might seem. She just sees the world a bit differently than everyone else.

Remus wrote back, although the contents of his latest letter weren't nearly as earth shattering. He's doing well, spending a lot of time at Headquarters. He didn't tell me about it, but Daphne says he's been trying to infiltrate werewolf packs in England, trying to measure their allegiance to both sides, maybe sway them over to us. It's worth a try, even if it will likely come to nothing.

No, I haven't forgotten the fact that you have been practicing this Summer with the intent of seizing one of the empty Chaser spots on the Slytherin team. Or that it's practically yours to lose. Pucey's the captain, but he's a little more concerned about actual talent than Flint ever was. There's a story that the only reason he let Maggie Bletchley on the team was because he once came upon her pummeling a First Year for bumping into her and being too scared to apologize. Charming girl, really. Point is, if you fly at half your ability, you'll still run rings around the Slytherin Sloth. Sadly, Draco's probably got the other spot wrapped up. I do promise you that if it worse comes to worst, he'll be the one getting blasted off his broom.

Got to cut this short, unfortunately. Daphne's going to spend the evening at Headquarters, but she wants to teach me the Servos Shield before she goes. The thing is one of the most bloody complicated spells I've ever seen in my life. And right dangerous, too. I'll be careful, don't worry.

Your ever-adoring boyfriend,

Harry

5th July 1995

The Burrow

Ottery St. Catchpole

Devon, England

Dear Harry,

You stupid prat! Do you really think I'd send you a pranked get-well present? I bloody well hope you didn't destroy that healing amulet (and yes, it's a real one, you cynical git) in the process of "investigating" the contents. Merlin, Harry, you'd think three years of friendship and coming up on six months of dating, you might have learned to trust me a bit.

In the future, I will explicitly state what each of your presents from me contains several weeks in advance, and utterly destroy any possibility of you being surprised by my thoughtfulness. Will that make you happy?

Life at the Burrow is...rather boring, actually. Mum and Dad keep getting called away to Order Headquarters, leaving Percy in charge of the family. Oh, and Fred and George just passed their Apparition tests. They seem to have a primal need to remind everyone in the house of that fact every few minutes. Two days ago, they Apparated into my **bedroom**. At 8 o'clock in the morning. Just after my morning **shower**. While I was **getting dressed**. Thank Merlin I was already wearing undergarments, else all three of us might have died of embarrassment. I would have hexed both of them to within an inch of their lives, but I tripped over the jeans I'd just started putting on, and couldn't get to my wand in time. Mum wasn't pleased about the scorch marks on the wall, though.

But, outside of that little...incident, things have been quiet here. Percy's getting ready to move out; his promotion to Minister Fudge's personal assistant also included a big pay raise, and he's picked out a nice flat in London, a few blocks from the Ministry. As you might expect, he's absolutely appalled by your behavior toward his boss, and none-too-pleased about the staying power of our relationship. I sense rocky waters ahead. He's always been the most displeased of us about our financial situation. Really, I'm surprised **he** wasn't the first Slytherin Weasley. Maybe there's a little Gryffindor in him, but I've yet to see any evidence of it.

Ron's been rather quiet all summer long. Hasn't uttered more than two or three disparaging comments about you or Slytherins in general

the whole time. He's working really hard on Quidditch. Wood's gone, so they've got an open Keeper spot, but they don't have a Seeker either. Ron's actually succeeded in hiding which position he's trying out for. It's a bit bothersome, really. I just wish he'd see that the fact that I'm Slytherin doesn't change the fact that I love him, and that I'm still his sister. I suppose the silence is a step in the right direction, though.

Hermione's really anxious to see both of us, I gather. She's also excited to see Neville. They get along pretty well. I suppose it helps them both, having another Gryffindor to relate to. No spectacular vacations this summer, apparently. Her parents have been very busy recently, moving their office to a more central location. So she's been stuck at home, reading. Quite a shocker, that last one. The hope is that she might come in a few weeks to stay the rest of the summer with us. Because she's your best friend, she's an obvious target, or so the Order reckons. They don't want to worry her parents, so they are going to give them some time with their daughter. Hermione doesn't always include everything she's feeling in her letters, and reading between the lines, I think she's going stir-crazy. You know her, always needing an outlet for all the stuff she insists upon cramming into the small head of hers. Well, she can't exactly discuss preparations for the O.W.L.s with her Muggle neighbors. And she's been having some other problems with the locals. A whole bunch of the brighter ones came up to her and asked her where she **really** went to school, because they got suspicious and somehow accessed the roster of the school her parents claim she goes to, which, of course, she isn't on. Apparently, they used these computing things; you probably know more than I do. Well, not only are they constantly wondering what she's up to, but one of them, a boy Hermione describes as, and I quote, "A shorter version of Harry with brown eyes and softer facial features," named Paxton Evans, had apparently developed a bit of a crush on her, or so she thinks. The boy keeps coming up to her in the local library, and asked her to a Muggle moving picture place last week. She begged off, but the kid's rather persistent. Poor Hermione. She's been keeping up with Krum, by the way, who invited her to Bulgaria to visit him. Again, she declined. Krum really likes her, but I just don't think the feelings are reciprocated. Oh well. I'd like to see Hermione get a boyfriend. Might make her a tad less neurotic.

You're damn right I'm going to get one of those spots! Well, at least I hope that's the case. I've been working my tail off, working on my passing more than anything else.

I'm glad to hear about your arm. Believe me, I was pretty frightened by the slow rate of healing too. Careful with poor Neville though. Too many compliments might induce seizures.

Either you're holding back, or I'm just soppier than I care to admit, because I miss you so much it's practically causing me physical pain. I understand about the security arrangements, but still, it's ridiculous we haven't seen each other since the end of term. Maybe I ought to just suck it up, and stop complaining. Sounds more Slytherin, really.

Best to end this before I embarrass myself even further, I reckon.

Hope to see you soon.

Your ever-faithful and Boy-Who-Lived-infatuated girlfriend,

Ginny

6th July 1995

The Zabini Family Estate

Tuscany, Italy

Dear Harry,

Writing to you from sunny and pleasant Tuscany this time. Dad's family is from this area originally, so we use it as a bit of a vacation spot, even if we live on a permanent basis at the house in Oxfordshire. Had a chance to reconnect with a few extended family members, including a few younger cousins. Don't really know them all that well, to be perfectly honest, but they're pretty bright. One of them, Dante, has a little talent with wandless magic. He's the oldest of them, at twelve, and he goes to a small wizarding academy in Naples. It's a decent school, so I hear, but it's got nothing on Hogwarts. No Quidditch teams either.

Like I said, we're ostensibly here to enjoy a little family vacation as the world starts to fall apart around us, but I think the real reason is that Dad's trying to re-establish some old family acquaintances. Actually, I reckon he's trying to set up a safety net if the Dark Lord should win out in Great Britain. They're on your side, of course, but Mum and Dad were never accused of being reckless or really dedicated to any cause besides the family itself. We Zabinis are survivors. Best case scenario is that we might be able to bring in a few families from the area into the fight against the Dark Lord, though I'm not all that optimistic. Even if they do come, you'll have a hell of a time convincing them to fight for you. Then again, you seem to have made a life out of exceeding expectations.

I'm with you, Harry, no matter what Mum and Dad decide to do. I've been looking for a person I respected enough to follow for quite some time, and I'm dead certain I've found him. I'm your friend, and I'm going to stick by you, even if my parents don't approve. It's high time I started living my own life anyway. Hopefully, we'll all fight alongside you, of course.

We didn't really get that much of a chance to talk about everything that happened. Yeah, I know you told us, but that was more of a narrative than an actual conversation. Regardless, it's enough to give me nightmares, and I just heard a vague second-hand account. If there's anything I can do, I'd be happy to help.

Think Hermione might have softened a bit on me? I sort of understand where her resentment comes from, but I can't for the life of me figure out what I've done to piss her off so royally. She finds a way to criticize practically everything I do. It's not all that flattering, to be perfectly honest.

Well, I've been training with Dad. Though I don't have the temperament to be a real Illusionist, he's still taught me a whole bunch of wicked tricks. Some of them might be right useful in a duel. Hopefully I'll get a chance to show a few of them to you when we see each other next. Oh, and Dad's pushing me to keep practicing with the swords again. Really, I can find some practical value in it, but it's bloody exhausting. Real, Goblin-made swords can't be lightened all that much before they start resisting the effects of the magic. Still, you

ought to give it a go. At this point you'll need every weapon you can get.

There's one last thing. Mum and Dad want to know about the Order of the Phoenix. They already know it's started up again, and all three of us understand that you can't tell us anything sensitive, but that's not what we want to know. Imagine a purely hypothetical situation where a certain family with a long lineage of Dark wizards and witches wanted to join. Would that even be possible? We just would like to hear your take on that. Dad thinks Dumbledore's a bit of an idiot for refusing the services of Dark wizards in the last war on the basis of principle. Lucky you came along, or that devotion to principle might well have cost them the war. Mum and Dad are pleased to hear you won't make the same mistakes, though Dad says you shouldn't forget the other side either. He's not overly fond of Light wizards – thinks they're quite arrogant and full of pompous self-righteousness – but he'll still admit that you'll need their help as much as you'll need the Dark families or the Muggleborns or anybody eels. Maybe more. Mum agrees with your thoughts concerning the sentiment in Germany and the surrounding area, and she's definitely a bit worried.

Hope you're healing well. Stay strong.

Blaise Adonis Zabini

11th July 1995

Greengrass Manor

Cornwall, England

Dear Harry,

It's been quite some time since we've spoken, but in light of recent events, I thought it appropriate to re-establish contact.

I must admit, Harry, that you continue to amaze me. I'm am certain that I will never learn the full story of how you managed to escape from the Dark Lord and his followers, but rest assured that I will try to do just that. That said, I understand that you are currently recovering

from severe injuries suffered at the hand of the Dark Lord. As a bit of a get-well present, I thought that you might appreciate a formal request for an alliance between the Potter and Greengrass families. That is what this letter represents.

Attached is a token of my honesty, a jeweled dagger. It is a family heirloom that was forged by Goblin metalsmiths over four hundred years ago. The steel of the blade is virtually indestructible, and the blade is completely harmless to the wielder, but can do some serious damage to an enemy. Occasionally, a wand is not the best weapon at a wizard's disposal. I hope you find use for my gift. It is yours to keep, whether you accept my offer or not.

I am certain that you wish to know the reasons for my offer: They are not difficult to understand. The Dark Lord has returned, and will undoubtedly come after my daughter and I because we were marked for death over a decade ago. I am an influential and powerful force in the Dark pureblood community, and my alliance with you will be a powerful symbol. The Dark Lord understands that you will need to unite the purebloods, Light and Dark, with the half-bloods and Muggleborns in order to overcome his forces and win this war. By killing me and my daughter, he would probably succeed in scaring others away from your side.

Hence, even as the ink dries on this piece of parchment, my daughter and I are preparing to go into hiding. Greengrass Manor will be warded against anyone not possessing the blood of its builders, and remain unoccupied until war's end. For security reasons, I cannot tell you where we are going. Daphne will attend Hogwarts this year, but I will remain in the shadows. I intend to leave on the first day of term at Hogwarts. I have business to attend to this summer.

Meeting you in person last year was a revealing experience, Harry. I sensed the extent of your power at the Quidditch World Cup, but it was your experience at Karachun that truly gave me an appreciation of the kind of wizard you are. Your compassion and kind heart is remarkable for one that has suffered as you have. Yet you do not allow yourself to become sentimental very often. It is the balance of those qualities that is the true measure of a man, Harry. It is his

capacity to care for others, combined with his own instincts for self-preservation that are the most telling of a man's future actions.

I do not believe you are prepared to fight the Dark Lord and triumph, or that you have finished maturing into the leader that you will need to be, a leader that we will all follow into the fires of Hell, because that is what you tell us must be done. But the progress that you have made is still remarkable. You cannot let up, Harry, but knowing you as I now do, I am hardly concerned by that possibility. Your stubborn relentlessness and competitive drive are other qualities that will serve you well as a leader.

I am the first to offer my formal allegiance, but I am certain I will not be the last. If you wish to accept my loyalty, simply sign the attached sheet of parchment. It will create a magically bonding agreement. We will agree to come to each other's defense if a crisis arises, and, unofficially, I will agree to serve in whatever army you create in whatever capacity you so desire. I owe you my life, Harry, and the life of my daughter. Such things are not easily forgotten. I can see the winds of destiny swirling about you. I only hope that my presence, and the presence of those I might bring with me, can help you survive to see your destiny fulfilled.

Yours in unceasing allegiance,

Aiden, Patriarch of the Family Greengrass

12th July 1995

Dressler Manor

Hampshire, England

Dear Blaise,

I appreciate all of your efforts on my behalf, and I understand that your family has to think of itself before it thinks of some greater cause. Allow your parents to make their own decisions, with the knowledge that I'd greatly appreciate their help. I have a feeling your allegiance has already been sworn, and for that, you have my thanks.

You'll definitely have to show me a few of the things your dad's been teaching you, both the Illusionist tricks and the blade-work. I've come into possession of a rather interesting dagger recently, although I'm intrigued by the possibility of working with larger blades. Hopefully you can teach me a few things when we both get back to Hogwarts.

I'm healing pretty well, all things considered. My arm's a rather nasty sight, but I've got most of my function back in it. Madam Pomfrey's actually rather surprised by how complete the healing on the inside has been. As for the outside...let's just say I've got more than one scar of note now. Not that I'm all that concerned, of course.

I've been training rather endlessly since the end of last term. I'm pretty strong for my age, Blaise, but I'm not nearly good enough yet. Voldemort threw me around like a rag doll, and that's setting aside the tremendous powers of the mind he seems to possess. I've got a lot of work ahead of me. I should just be grateful that I've survived this long, I suppose. Still, I've made some major progress on my shields, including some work on magic-absorbing defensive spells like the Servos Shield. I've focused the rest of my time on perfecting what I already know. I have decided that I'll ask Snape to teach me the Slashing Curse when we get back to school. He invented it, after all. Daphne can use it, but she insists she isn't capable of actually teaching it. So we'll just have to see.

I do have some news for you to pass along to your parents. Aiden Greengrass and I have entered into a formal family alliance. Aiden's was one of my first outside supporters, and he's probably been the best. He's a fine man, an honorable man. He has his flaws, but so do we all. Another thing that you might want your parents to know is that Daphne told me not to even bother asking if they might be allowed to join the Order. Dumbledore's stance against Dark wizards is practically set in stone. Then again, Snape's a member, but I suppose he's a special case. It's idiotic, really. I understand that Dumbledore's fought Dark wizards that have become murderous despots his whole life, but you'd think 200 years of living might have taught him by now that there are many exceptions to every rule. You'd think the fact that one of those enemies was his Gryffindor roommate might also have taught him something. In light of that, you might pass along that I'm considering forming my own close-knit

group of my most trustworthy and capable allies and friends. I'm not sure when it will happen, but I'd like to get a start on it this year. I need to have people around me that I know that I can rely on. Right now, most of our classmates aren't capable of surviving five minutes with the average Death Eater, let alone defeating one. That has to change. We're going to be the soldiers in this war, Blaise, whether we like it or not. It's always been this way, and that isn't ever going to change. The younger generations bear the brunt of warfare. They are the fittest, the most idealistic, and the most eager. They make good soldiers. Cynical adults don't.

Well, this ended up a bit more long-winded than I'd thought it would be, so I'll wrap this up. Tell your parents that they shouldn't be bothered by Dumbledore's rejection, and that I'd love to have them. The more families I gather, the more attention and credibility I get. And I haven't forgotten about the Light families. I suppose I just don't know where to start.

Well, see you at school. And get your Potions essay done on time this year.

Your friend,

Harry

14th July 1995

218 Victoria Street

Bristol, England

Dear Harry,

Merlin, it seems like its been years since we last saw each other. I heard from Ginny recently, and it sounds like you are healing pretty well. I just hope you aren't overextending yourself too soon. You went through more than most wizards could endure and still be expected to survive, Harry. Don't forget that.

Well, I haven't been able to do any training this summer, for obvious reasons, but I've done a fair bit of reading, trying to find new spells, as well as learning more about unusual abilities such as mine. I've uncovered some truly fascinating information that I hope to share with you next time we're together. I've also been in the process of organizing my notes from our first four years into a more manageable format. Don't forget, our O.W.L.s are this year! I'm rather anxious about it, actually. I've read that our results often dictate the careers we end up pursuing, and that some employers look at them with more care than they give to our N.E.W.T.s, because we're not allowed to drop any core classes until 6th year. I've done some research on possible positions in the Ministry in the past, and I've decided that I'd really love to be part of the Department of Magical Research and Development. It's one of the most competitive jobs in Britain; even if you manage perfect O.W.L. results, they might still turn you down. The pay's good, but that really doesn't matter; I'd love to have a chance not just to learn about magic, but to actually contribute my own original spells and magical objects. It's actually been an ambition of mine for several years.

This little voice in my head that sounds suspiciously like Ginny is reminding me that I'm rambling a bit on academic matters, so I'll change subjects. Have you given any more thought as to how you'll try to gain allies from the Light families? I suppose that very little can be done with Muggleborns and half-bloods because you essentially have to make your case to the children that are attending Hogwarts right now. Honestly, I don't really understand this entire thing, and truth be told I'm not sure I want to, but I'd think that if you kept focusing on Dark families, the Light families might not be so apt to see things your way. That's my advice, anyway, although I'm sure you've heard it a million times by now from a large number of people.

I'm trying to pick out your birthday present at the moment. A book, obviously, but I'm trying to find something for you that might be genuinely useful. It's not that easy, considering the literature you already have. Hopefully divine inspiration hits me and I come up with a grand idea.

Have you heard from Neville this summer? I've exchanged a few letters, but he doesn't seem to say much, other than the expected

pleasantries. Sometimes I really worry about him, Harry. Maybe you ought to write him? He seems to open up a bit when you are around. I think it's worth a try.

OH! Before I forget, I actually heard from Professor Lupin yesterday. I'd sent him a letter a few days after the end of term, and it seems that his delayed responses aren't exclusive to you after all. He's doing well, although it seems he's been on some missions he wouldn't tell me anything about. He seemed pleased to hear from me, which was nice. Have you heard who the new DADA professor will be this year? Professor Moody has apparently had enough. Personally, I'm not sure he was ever fit for teaching students, although to be fair, he wasn't exactly comfortable, even after he was rescued. And his discomfort is completely understandable. I'd love it if Professor Lupin could come back. I hate to speak ill of my elders, but he's the only teacher we've had that's really taught me much of anything...well, besides Crouch. But that hardly counts, don't you think?

Mum's calling me down to make dinner. She's actually trying to teach me how to cook like a Muggle. I'm truly awful right now, and she knows it too, but keeps trying. I get the sense she wants to spend as much time around me as possible. I suppose I can't really blame her for that, either.

Love,

Hermione

14th July 1995

Dressler Manor

Hampshire, England

Dear Aiden,

I don't think you can begin to understand how much your offer means to me. I formally accept that offer, of course, and you can consider this letter as proof of our agreement. May we have a long and fortuitous relationship.

I hope that you and Daphne are well. Are you planning to allow the news that your family has gone into hiding to become public knowledge? I could understand if you didn't want that to get out, and I assure you I'm quite good at keeping secrets.

Aiden, there is something I would like to ask of you. You are a foremost expert on the Dark Arts, and quite knowledgeable when it comes to a variety of other weapons. If we could arrange it, would it be possible for you to teach me a few things? It might be difficult to find time, but I'm certain that anything I learn from you will be of prime importance.

I'd like to express my gratitude again, and let you know that I understand the tremendous risk that you are taking. I will do everything in my power to insure I don't make you regret your decision.

As for the rest, let your actions be guided by your own wisdom. I'm not asking you to take chances you'd rather not.

Yours in unceasing allegiance,

Harry Potter

20th July 1995

Headquarters of the -----

-----, England

Dear Harry,

Sorry about the header. I can't tell you where I'm writing from, literally.

Two days ago, somebody tried to breach the wards at the Burrow. As in, somebody tried to completely strip away the defenses. Seems that they weren't counting on Bill, who not only installed a tampering alarm, but also a painful recoil system that fries any non-Weasley that tries to mess with the wards. We don't know who it was, or how, but yesterday we were told to gather up all of our things and come to -----

----- Ugh. I hate this stupid Fidelius Charm. Hey, at least that came out!

So, anyway, the Burrow's been abandoned for the time being. There are protections on it, of course, though I doubt they'll be needed. There really isn't anything worth anybody's while. And Bill's added some anti-arson wards just in case. I've been seeing a lot more of him recently, which, believe me, is a good thing. He's taken some time off this summer to do work for the ----- . This is so pointless! It's not as though you can't guess what's been redacted!

I really hope you come and join us soon. I heard a rumor to that effect a little after we arrived. Hermione's here too. Looks like the attempt at the Burrow made Dumbledore concerned for her safety. Don't you dare blame yourself, just in case you were considering it. We're as much a part of this war as you are. We believe in it, we want to fight, and we want to stand by you. That's what friends are for, right?

Anyway, I hope to see you sooner than we'd hoped!

Your frustrated-but-devoted girlfriend,

Ginny

21st July 1995

183 Daunting Street

Canterbury, England

Dear Harry,

I suppose this letter might come as a bit of a surprise. After all, while we've spoken in the past, our relationship can best be described as casual. You're a Slytherin. I'm a Hufflepuff. In the past, that's been enough to keep us apart.

No more. The War has begun, and you know it better than anyone. What you've been through, what you've survived...honestly, it's quite difficult to believe. Yet you still live.

I'm not making a formal offer of alliance, or even an informal one. I can't speak for my aunt, or the rest of the Bones family. But I write you as one who knows you personally, and understands the kind of individual that you are, beyond the Daily Prophet headlines and absurd rumors. You know, one nice thing about being a Hufflepuff is that we're always underestimated. No one ever considers us a threat. So they let us hear things we probably shouldn't. This is especially true of Slytherins, although it's clear you don't share the disdain for my House that your classmates possess. The way you treated Cedric, in life and in death, was testament to that. You were his friend, and he made it a point to defend your honor when others in my House challenged it. He told us that you were a victim in all of this, that you had the utmost respect for him as a competitor, and that we shouldn't oppose you because you threatened our chance at glory. And we listened, Harry. We listened with more intent that you'll ever see us devote to our lessons.

Cedric was a hero to us all, Harry. He was a model Hufflepuff, a strong and hard-working student who was athletic, good-looking, and finally, after so long, promised to bring glory to the House of the Badger. I want you to understand that neither I nor my friends blame you for competing as hard as you possibly could. That you brought his body back with you, when you could have easily left it, meant more to use than you can ever possibly hope to understand.

What I'm trying to tell you, Harry, is that we're with you. That includes me, Zacharias, Sally-Anne, Alison, Justin, Ernie, and Hannah. I can't speak for the others, but know that you have many friends in Hufflepuff. You're a bit dark and distant sometimes, Harry, and it's off-putting, but we've noticed things like the way you helped Neville Longbottom, and even Ginny Weasley, when no one else would. And you've stayed true to them even when they disappointed you. That kind of loyalty is prized among us. As a Slytherin, I'm sure there are many more pressures to leave the weak by the wayside. But you haven't yet succumbed.

I'll admit we don't know what kind of dangers fate has in store for us, Harry. But know that we are willing to work our tails off to prepare for them. You've been saying that none of us would stand much chance against the weakest Death Eater for some time now. We want you to

change that. And it won't just be us, Harry. If you lead, others will follow. Ravensclaws, your fellow Slytherins...even those pesky Gryffindors. Let us know of your plans, and we do as you ask...within reason, of course. But I'm sure you already know that.

I'll see you at the beginning of term, Harry. I hope that you are having a fine summer.

Sincerely,

Susan Elizabeth Trent Bones

22nd July 1995

Dressler Manor

Hampshire, England

Dear Susan,

Cedric was a friend, and a fine wizard. He died bravely, defiant to the end, the way any warrior would choose to go out if he had to die before his time, I'd think. We'll all be diminished by his absence. I'm honored by your offer of support. If what one looks for in an ally or friend is loyalty, integrity, and trustworthiness, than who better to have at your back than a Hufflepuff?

Your House's reputation and principles are unfairly mocked by those that do not understand the importance of the values embodied by Helga. As you suggested, I am not one of those individuals.

In terms of training, I can't promise you anything at this point. I suppose it'll depend a great deal on Dumbledore's choice of Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. I'd hope that the Headmaster might recognize how dire the situation truly is, and give us a teacher willing to prepare us for what we might well face, but Ministry interference cannot be ruled out. You've no doubt seen the cowardly and, if I might say so myself, rather pathetic attempts to discredit me personally and thus the word of anyone associated with me. Fudge is a fool if he thinks he can rid himself of me that easily. The time for

waiting, for delaying, has come to end. We must take action, or we will find ourselves scrambling to catch up when hostilities commence. I predict that will happen before the year is out.

To those who might question our place as soldiers in this war, I can only offer history itself. My parents were thrust into the heart of the war when they were just a few years older than I was, and many of their friends and classmates died because they were woefully unprepared. Voldemort's rise was slow and concealed in the shadows the first time. This is going to change. While he doesn't want to push the Ministry into action, the time that it takes him to reach his full strength will be measured in months, not years.

I'm sure you understand that Fudge's incompetence and cowardice infuriates me to no end. In the end, the price of his incompetence will be paid in blood. Innocent lives will be snuffed out because he fears tarnishing his legacy. I am unsure of how your aunt feels about all of this, but I am certain she cannot be content with the current situation.

I don't mean to cause you or your friends to panic. Rather, I tell you about the dire straights we are all in so that you might understand how much your actions mean to me personally, and to the war effort itself. I hope that your example inspires others. There are some that will believe the venom and slander in the Daily Prophet, I am certain. There is little I can do about that. I suppose it's testimony to the mental acuity of you and the other incoming 5th and 4th year Hufflepuffs that you've managed not only to overcome the negative image of me that has been widely accepted at Hogwarts, as well as the public perception pushed by those who know nothing of the real situation.

It is possible, I suppose, that certain things I say or do might offend your own morals or Light leanings. But know this: No matter what the means are that I will use, I am committed to one thing, and one thing only: The defeat of Lord Voldemort and those who follow him. As for the rest...sometimes you just have to let the future attend to itself.

Yours in absolute sincerity,

Harry James Potter

22nd July 1995

Office of the Headmaster

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Dear Daphne,

It's that time of year again, it seems. Already late July, and again I am without a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher for the coming term. On some days, it's enough to make me start believing those stories about the position being cursed. And just like the last two years, I'd like to once again invite you to fill that void on our staff.

Despite your controversial past, you are the most qualified for the position in all of Britain. Your experience, your knowledge, and your ability to impart that knowledge to others would serve you well in this capacity.

I understand your reasons for declining my request in the past. It is indeed a great responsibility to be tasked with teaching witches and wizards how to defend themselves against the Dark Arts. The burden has never been heavier than it is at this moment. As you are no doubt aware, I would prefer that all children had a chance to keep their innocence long into adulthood, and were never asked to kill or be killed for a cause they may well not understand. But nearly two-hundred years of living has left me with but a sliver of the idealism I once held. It is a very real possibility that the students under my care will become soldiers on both sides. And so with that in mind, I can do little but ensure that most of them have the training that might allow them to survive and create a world without such senseless violence and barbaric warfare.

Daphne, I am not asking you as your former Headmaster or teacher. I am not asking you as a mentor. I am not asking you as the Head of the Order of the Phoenix. I am asking you as a friend, a man that has admittedly failed you at times, but cares deeply for you, and for your ward. Please, take the position. I cannot bear to see the Siege of Hogwarts repeated, to see so many young lives snuffed out, completely helpless in the face of evil. If all I can truly give them is a

fighting chance, than I need you to help me keep that most meager of promises.

If you accept or decline, I do not need to know the reasons for your choice. Should you accept, staff meetings begin on August 1st. I hope to see there.

Sincerely,

Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore

27th July 1995

Dressler Manor

Hampshire, England

Dear Albus,

I accept.

Sincerely,

Daphne Artemis O'Connor Dressler

28th July 1995

63 Downing Street

Offices of the Daily Prophet

London, England

Dear Mr. Potter,

While it's been some time since we last met, I'm certain you haven't forgotten me. And I certainly haven't forgotten you. Or our agreement. I've kept my end of the bargain, it's time for you to keep yours. One little article is hardly enough to keep my bosses happy.

I'm sure you think you are quite clever, the way you've blackmailed me. But I was a Slytherin also, Mr. Potter, and the lessons I learned haven't entirely slipped my mind.

I have ways, Mr. Potter, of neutralizing your leverage. I have friends in many places, some of them of the elevated variety. But I'm not writing to threaten you. I'm sure you've noticed the pale imitations of my co-workers, most of whom are using words directly from the Ministry's mouth in order to discredit you. Apparently, Minister Fudge has been nearly obsessed with you this entire summer. I'm not sure what you said, but if you intended to draw the attention of every powerful figure in the Ministry, then the job was well done. If not...well, sometimes we all have to deal with the consequences of our actions.

I have a proposition to make, Mr. Potter. We will schedule an interview. You may provide your own dictation quill if you wish. You needn't tell me the entire story of what happened in that hour that you vanished from the Hogwarts Grounds, merely enough to grab the attention of the populous. If there is anything I've learned in my time as a journalist, it's that that task is far more simple than it sounds. You are a fascinating individual, Harry. You are all at once a tragic hero, a cold, menacing reprobate, a shadowy manipulator, an innocent victim, a powerful, disrespectful rogue...in short, you are a news correspondent's dream. I have lost face at the Prophet because I have refused to write the normal scandalous, scathing articles about you that they have come to expect. They do not know why, and that frustrates them to no end.

Unfortunately, we may still have a problem. The Prophet would not print your interview. It is not fair to say that the Ministry controls the press, but they have an undue amount of influence. It's possible it could be a single-issue, independent publication, but I don't have the resources to make that happen.

Rest assured, though, Mr. Potter, that if you do not comply with my request, I will find a way to register, and then I will turn you into the most hated person in Britain.

Have a pleasant day,

Rita Skeeter

29th July 1995

Dressler Manor

Hampshire, England

Dear Ms. Skeeter,

You seem to be under the illusion that I thought I could control you forever. Apparently you underestimate my intelligence, common sense, and foresight. I'm only surprised your request hasn't come earlier.

As I recall, our agreement was only supposed to cover the time in which I was competing in the Triwizard Tournament. It would be dishonest of me to force you to extend that oral contract a day later. Name a time and place, and I will be there. I will not tell you everything. But I assure you, your name will be forever associated with one of the most controversial, heart-tugging stories of all time.

Perhaps I'm getting ahead of myself, but I can't exactly say I have a lack of material. I look forward to a long and profitable relationship, Rita.

As for a publisher, I have an...unusual suggestion. I'm quite good friends with the daughter of the man who runs the Quibbler. Now, I realize it doesn't have the readership or the credibility of the Prophet, but it's a name that people know. And I'm certain a front-page article, written by Rita Skeeter, is going to convince people to overlook the Quibbler's reputation.

I await your response.

Sincerely,

Harry James Potter

31st July 1995

Longbottom Sanctuary

Lancashire, England

Dear Harry,

Well, first, Happy Birthday! Thanks for the birthday card, and the book you sent me. I suppose it works best this way, with you starting the exchange. Gran threw a surprisingly big party, with practically ever Longbottom in Europe in attendance. It was a bit awkward, really. The rest don't expect as much from me as Gran, but they think of my parents when they look at me. At least I might have a chance to live up to them now, thanks to you. Gran was pretty well floored when I performed a Stunning Spell for her. She told me to tell you that you're an excellent teacher.

I've been working a bit on the stuff I already know. I've been using the old dueling chamber in the basement. I don't think anyone's been down there since before I was born. But it's got targets, references, everything you need, really. Hopefully I'm getting better at this. It feels that way, at least.

I've also been working on another big project this summer. Professor Sprout wrote Gran at the end of last term and told her all about my success in Herbology. Guess what Gran gave me as an early Birthday present? A greenhouse! Now, I haven't really been able to grow anything spectacular, though I just planted a baby Venomous Tentacula a week ago. I've got the injuries to prove it, too. I've actually written Professor Sprout for advice on a few things, and she's been really good about responding. I really like her, actually. She's grounded, if you know what I mean.

Well, I've been hearing whispers about some sort of secret society that's re-organizing, one that helped bring down You-Know-Who last time. I'm sure you know more about it than me, anyway.

Well, that's about it. I did get a birthday card from Luna, though. Actually, her owl arrived at the exact moment that I was born fifteen years ago. A bit odd, that. But then again, she's Luna. I actually kind of like her. She's, well...I don't know what she is, but she has this strange way of making me feel good and nervous as hell at the same

time. I'm not really sure if that's a good thing, but the former is a nice change. You know her better than I do, I suppose. What's she like, really? I mean, does she really believe all the things she says? I've always thought she was a bit more than she let on. She just knows things, things that she shouldn't have been able to find out. And she can always tell me exactly what I'm worried about at any given time. It's a bit creepy, really.

I guess I'm rambling. I hope you're healing well, and don't let the Prophet get you down. Gran cancelled our subscription a few days after I got back. Says it's a whole lot of rubbish, especially the stuff about you. I mean, I suppose they aren't wrong in suggesting you're learning the Dark Arts, but the implications are that you're unbalanced, dangerous, and a threat to the general public because of your power. Maybe you are dangerous, but I don't care much for the people that feel genuinely threatened. Gran laughed for about ten minutes when I told her what you said to Fudge. Then she told me that you were absolutely right, and that I should be both pleased and terrified. I think for once I actually understood what she was saying.

Sorry to end on that note, but I've got to feed the Tentacula. See you at Hogwarts!

Your friend,

Neville

31st July 1995

Headquarters of the -----

-----, England

Dear Harry,

Happy Birthday! I hope you enjoy my present. It wasn't easy to find. But you told me that Aiden Greengrass had noted the parallels between your life and that of Merlin, so I figured that I'd get you the best biography of him that I could. It's out of print, but I managed to get it from a used book dealer on Diagon Alley. I skimmed through it

myself, and I think that I made a wise purchase. I hope you feel the same way.

Well, as you might have ascertained from the blank in the header, I'm at Headquarters. Tonks came for me yesterday. My parents weren't all that pleased, but they were awfully polite about it. I'm honestly not sure what to do about them, Harry. I love them so much, but they just don't understand the importance of what's going on right now in the wizarding world, and if they did, they'd shut me up in the attic with all my books until it was over. Obviously, I can't let that happen. I just don't know how I'm going to be able to explain this to them, because that day is going to come sooner or later. I got my brains from them, after all. I suspect they've already figured out a lot more than they are letting on. I just hope when the day comes, I can make them understand. They were so excited about Hogwarts when my letter came, but I could tell they were having a hard time let me go. I often wonder if they regret letting me see that letter. I hope not.

Things are rather uninteresting here. Well, that's mostly because we're not allowed to attend the meetings. I've seen Daphne a few times, and she seems like she's doing okay. She was a bit cold and distant last time, but I suppose that's nothing unusual. I hear you might be joining us soon. I can't wait to see you again.

Love,

Hermione

31st July 1995

Headquarters of the -----

-----, England

Dear Harry,

Happy Birthday! Fifteen, wow. Hermione said she overheard someone saying you might be coming to join us soon. Merlin I hope that's true. I hope you like your present. Sirius apparently sent you the Firebolt back, along with something else. I'm sure you've gotten it already,

since his owl left a few hours before mine. I don't think I ever learned the whole story of how Sirius ended up with the Firebolt again in the first place. It's too bad about your Nimbus. That was a fine broom. Anyway, I made the pendant myself. It was a little side project I worked on in Transfiguration. It's not really what I'd been imagining, but I think it looks pretty good. Bill helped me with the inscription. He's aching to see you too.

I think that my parents might be saving up to buy me a broomstick. They try so hard, and I just hope they don't break the bank. I talked about how good my chances were of making the Slytherin team a few times, and I guess that's what gave them the idea.

I still miss you. Please get here soon.

Your pathetically, unSlytherinly longing girlfriend,

Ginny

1st August 1995

Dressler Manor

Hampshire, England

Dear Ginny,

Thanks for the Birthday wishes, and the present. The pendant is quite pretty, and that you Transfigured it yourself means a great deal. I've attached it to the same string that holds the medal my parents left me.

Seems like the rumors are true. Daphne just told me we're leaving for Headquarters tomorrow. See you then!

Your eagerly anticipating boyfriend,

Harry

Chapter 2: Delusions

Harry stepped carefully into the room, watchful not to disturb anything as he peered around. The state of affairs was neat, although a thin layer of dust had settled over the floor, the walls, and every object in the room. The bed in the center clearly had not been used since before Harry was even born, and the room had seen precious few visitors. His eyes were drawn, however, to the clearly polished, nearly spotless glass of a large cabinet in the corner of the room. He took several more steps towards the bed, looking around for other anomalies. He noted the framed picture that sat on the nightstand that appeared to have been dusted fairly recently, although the glass was not as pristine as that of the display case. Hung around the room was the familiar green-and-silver banner of Slytherin House. The sheets and comforter on the unused bed were a dark green, as were the hangings of the large four-poster bed itself.

Harry's eyes began to detect more subtle details as he examined the room more closely. The bedposts featured ornate carvings of snakes and eagles. The walls were relatively spartan, except for a fine magical painting of a ship rolling in rough seas, one that seemed strangely out of place. Also, he noted a small family crest, almost looking as though it was present out of obligation, rather than because the room's occupant wanted it there. He saw no other symbols of the man's Dark loyalties, no tokens of his service. Indeed, the room, although clearly abandoned, really didn't look all that much different from one that *he* might have lived in. He scanned the titles on the dusty bookshelf, whispering a Cleaning Charm to clear away a decade of neglect. There were a few books on the Dark Arts, but of the relatively tame variety, some books on Quidditch, a few on Potions, and a number of books with blank spines. Something about that struck him as odd.

Frowning, he whispered the Incantation for the Revealing Charm, and found his suspicions confirmed as the air shimmered with dispersing magic. And as he stared at the silver inscriptions on the first few battered and well-worn books, his pensive expression morphed into a broad grin.

The Fellowship of the Ring – Wizard's Edition

The Two Towers – Wizard's Edition

The Return of the King – Wizard's Edition

The Hobbit - Wizard's Edition

All that was left to complete the parallel was...there is was:

The Chronicles of Narnia Collector's Edition – Wizard's Printing

Yes, he and Regulus Archturus Black had quite a bit in common. The same interests, the same choice of *Muggle* fantasy writing, the same House, the same preference for spartan elegance over ostentatious décor...

Except for that bit about him becoming a Death Eater, Harry reminded himself.

Harry pulled away from the bookshelf and moved to the nightstand. He carefully picked up the picture and stared at the moving occupants. Regulus was at the center, a boy with long black hair and pale blue eyes, with only his wire-frame glasses and slightly sharper facial features setting him apart from his brother, and Harry's Godfather, Sirius Orion Black. The boy in the picture, who was probably about thirteen, wore the same cheeky grin he'd seen in the photographs of the Marauders. Flanking the Death-Eater-to-be were Walburga (whose immovable portrait was prone to violent rages, although Harry had managed to speak a few polite words to her before Sirius showed up and caused her to start screaming) and Orion Black, both looking middle-aged and possessed of the same elegance and grace for which the Black family was renowned. The boy looked quite happy, and his parents equally proud. Harry smiled slightly at that, although he was fully aware Sirius's parents were rather nasty individuals that, although too old to fight for the Dark Lord, still donated considerable funds to his operations. *And their favored son*, Harry silently added.

His hand moved to the drawer and pulled. It was locked. He tried an Unlocking Spell. No luck. Deciding not to blast it open, he moved on.

He was examining the contents of the cabinet, noting a couple of daggers, some jewelry, and a few odd trinkets, in addition to Regulus's framed O.W.L. results. He'd aced them cold.

"*Harry?*" Sirius's voice came from the doorway. Harry lazily glanced back at him, and then squinted as he tried to read the inscription on a large pendant. It was written in a language he didn't recognize.

"What are you doing?" Sirius demanded, sounding angry. "Must I chase you away from every single room in this bloody house that I *don't* want you to go into? First the Black Family Tree..."

"The study of which I intend to resume when I've got some time on my hands," Harry interrupted. He turned to face his Godfather. "It was quite interesting, really. I'd never have dreamed my Great-Great-Aunt was born a Black. And the Longbottoms, the Prewetts, the Crouches...I'd no idea that the Blacks intermarried with Light families so often."

"Practically every wizarding family in existence dates back to the Blacks," Sirius said shortly. "Now come on, get out of there!"

"Why?" Harry asked innocently.

"Because you shouldn't be there," Sirius insisted, his voice a harsh whisper, as if he was trying not to attract attention. "I've no idea what drew you here in the first place. Hermione's down in the Library, reading. Ginny's doing her homework, too. Why don't you go join them?"

"While you ward this place off and forget you ever had a brother?" Harry asked, a hard edge to his voice. "He wasn't *that* bad, Sirius."

"He was a *Death Eater!*" Sirius shouted, abandoning all attempts at keeping the conversation quiet.

Harry waved his arms at the room. "You can learn a lot about a person by studying the space they lived in, you know," he said. "There's not a single artifact documenting his loyalty to Voldemort," Harry continued, despite the stricken look on Sirius's face. "In fact, I'd bet good money that your parents didn't give him all that much choice

when it came to taking the Mark. They were in love with Voldemort's goals, his ideas about blood superiority and the inferiority of Muggles and those possessed of their blood. But they were far too old to serve him themselves. So they gave him Regulus."

Something flashed behind Sirius's murky blue eyes, dulled by over a decade in Azkaban. "Don't say that name!" he snapped. "Get out. Now!"

Harry ignored him, and reached for the handle of the cabinet. Sirius's eyes widened. "NO! Stop!"

Harry pulled the door open. Without warning, both of the daggers suddenly rose into the air and shot straight at his chest. Harry's magic reacted instantly and instinctively, freezing them in mid-air, light glistening off the polished blades. Harry began to push back, and the daggers were forced back into the cabinet. Then he slammed the door hard so fast it rattled the rest of the contents. For good measure, he locked it. He stood there, panting heavily, before slowly turning to look at his Godfather.

Sirius looked horrified, but his expression quickly turned to anger. "You see? This entire bloody *house* is booby-trapped! You *ignore* me, and you nearly get killed for it...where the bloody hell did you get *that*?!" he demanded, his eyes widening to the size of saucers as he eyed the jewel-encrusted dagger in Harry's left hand.

"Aiden Greengrass," Harry said simply. He turned the weapon over in his hand, peered into the cabinet, and found his suspicions confirmed. The daggers were almost identical in size, although the hilts and ornate decorations were quite different. *Looks like this is another Pureblood tradition I ought to be familiar with...got to do some reading, find out if a dagger is a traditional part of offering an alliance.*

Absently, he turned back to face his Godfather. If the man's eyes bulged any more they'd pop right out of his head. "Greengrass..?" he breathed.

Harry nodded.

"Harry, you don't understand what that..." he said, indicating the weapon Harry had just flipped in his hands, "means," he finished.

"So it *is* a traditional part of forming a family Alliance, then?" Harry asked, keeping his voice innocently curious. Sirius probably knew more about Dark purebloods and their practices than he cared to admit.

Somehow, Harry's words had struck a chord within Sirius, who looked as though he might faint. "An-"

"Alliance, yes," Harry said impatiently. His Godfather was being utterly ridiculous, as he always was when it came to all things Dark. It drove Harry over the edge at times. He settled on not even bothering to try to win Sirius over, hoping to shock him into accepting what Harry was, what he had to do, and how he had to do it. All of which involved Dark wizards and spells in one fashion or another. "Aiden and I met for the first time at the Quidditch World Cup, although I'd been communicating with him through his daughter for some time. She's a Slytherin in my year," he offered by way of explanation, although the reminder that his Godson was in the House of Serpents, Voldemort, and Severus Snape didn't do wonders for Sirius's complexion. "I attended a certain ritual with him this winter. Early this summer, he wrote me and formally requested an Alliance, citing that he believed in my power and potential leadership ability, and that he was in the same boat as me; he and his daughter were marked for death. I accepted. The Potters and the Greengrasses are now formally allied."

Strangely enough, the last few sentences, the ones that Harry thought make Sirius go ballistic, had remarkably little effect. He'd frozen at the mention of a winter ritual. "W-w-what ritual?" he asked, his voice shaking.

Harry met his Godfather's eyes, and braced for the inevitable explosion. "*Karachun*."

"*WHAT?!*"

"Sirius, *please*..."

“That’s *illegal!*” he screamed. “That’s the Darkest, filthiest, most corrupt of them all! It celebrates the demise of *everything* your parents stood for! What would they say, Harry? What would they say if they saw their son in the company of a criminal, practicing Dark magic, attending the most *foul* of all their rituals? What’s *next*, Harry? *Torturing Muggles? The Unforgivables?!*” he ranted.

Harry’s patience wore thin. “*Shut up you prejudicial bastard,*” he hissed. It was English, but it sounded eerily like Parseltongue, and Sirius stopped just as he was about to open his mouth to say more. “Listen to me,” he ordered, subconsciously pushing magic into his words, holding his Godfather spellbound.

Harry’s eyes burned darkly. “I don’t know what my parents would say, Sirius, because they’re *dead*. They *died* to save my life, so that I could survive and fight Voldemort. I came to the realization some time ago that I can’t do it on my own. I need allies. Aiden came to me. I recognized the value of our relationship. He’s powerful, influential, and smart as hell. Moreover, he’s loyal, and it’s a kind of loyalty that comes from desperation. That’s probably the best kind, really. He’s got nowhere to run, and everything to lose. He has no choice but to support my efforts, because he genuinely believes I’m the only person that can do it. He’s a rather charitable man, actually. A *Gryffindor*, like yourself and my parents.”

Sirius seemed to be trying to say something, but Harry’s magical grip on his attention did not relent. “Personally, I think that if all my parents wanted was for me to survive, then they wouldn’t object to me allying myself with a Dark family. Because I might very well need him, his daughter, and the allies and credibility he’ll bring with him in order to survive. That’s what Slytherins are good at, you know. Surviving.”

“I’ve had enough of your poorly disguised efforts to lure me away from my mother,” he continued, the words sounding odd on his lips. “I’ve had enough of your self-righteous rants about how Dark I’m becoming, and how ashamed my parents would be of me. I’ve had enough of your using their memories to try to gain leverage on me, fruitless as it has been. I had enough of your disparagement of Slytherin House, your lamenting that I wasn’t Sorted elsewhere, your crude comments about Ginny, your pestering Hermione to find out

just how much of the Dark Arts I know, and your prowling of the house to try to keep me out of places that I want to investigate, precisely *because* of their Dark nature. You are my Godfather in nothing but *name*, Sirius. I'm not James, I never will be James, and frankly, I don't *want* to be James. I don't hate him anymore; Remus told me things that made me believe he really had changed into a brave and decent man. But that doesn't change the fact that we're entirely different individuals. I *like* who I am, Sirius."

Harry sighed, staring at his enchanted Godfather with in disgust and pity. "I'm not even going to bother arguing this with you. Don't worry, as soon as I get a certain distance away, the spell will be broken. In case you are wondering, I didn't use Dark magic on you. What I've done is nothing more or less than the same thing Dumbledore uses to quiet the Great Hall when he's about to speak. The ability comes with power, of which I have abundance."

Harry began to leave the room. "Think about what I've said, Sirius. Think about it, *please*. I'd like to have an amicable relationship with you. But that won't happen if you keep meddling in things you have no business trying to change, even if you could."

Harry walked past his Godfather, and headed for the Black Family Library. The section containing books on Dark magic and rituals were warded off, although Harry was fairly certain Hermione could disable them if she wanted to. Problem was that she didn't.

Sure enough, Sirius had been telling the truth, and Hermione was seated in an armchair, reading, while his girlfriend sat at a polished oak table, quill scratching out the introduction to her summer Potions essay. Both girls glanced up at him as he entered. "You had another row with Sirius?" Ginny asked.

Harry nodded. "How'd you guess?"

"We could hear him screaming from down here," Hermione explained. "Honestly, what did you do to get him so wound up? Did he catch you practicing?"

Harry shook his head. "I was in Regulus's room."

Hermione shook her head. "Why on Earth-"

"Because I've heard so little about him, and I wanted to know more," Harry said, sitting down on a couch. "Just looking at his room, I don't get the sense he was as evil as Sirius would have you believe."

"Harry, he *was* a Death Eater," Ginny reminded him, glancing up from her assignment.

"I don't think he served willingly. That he was apparently executed by Voldemort for cowardice would seem to support that theory. He was just a scared kid, Hermione, forced by his parents and tradition to join the ranks of the Dark Lord. Bloody brilliant too. He aced his O.W.L.s," Harry explained.

"Really?" Hermione asked, her irritation instantly forgotten and interest aroused.

"Sirius did too, I think," Ginny said. Harry nodded. Sirius Black was known to be a very, very smart man, although he rarely showed it around his Godson.

"Was there anything else?" Hermione asked, sounding suspicious. She was *good*.

"I told him about my alliance with Aiden. And about *Karachun*. He ranted at me. I made him shut up, did that thing Dumbledore does to silence crowds, and read him the riot act. I told him to get over who and what I am, or to forget that Dad ever named him my Godfather."

Hermione shook her head in dismay, "Oh, Harry..." she moaned.

"Serves him right," Ginny said, a predatory grin splitting her face. "He's pretty bad at subtlety. He called me a whore within my earshot."

Hermione went pale. "*What?* That's horrible!" she cried.

"I'd made some rather pointed comments to him about Harry, and he muttered it under his breath when I was leaving," Ginny said matter-of-factly. "He's just delusional. Azkaban loosened his screws."

"Don't say that, Ginny," Hermione said sharply.

"No, you shouldn't," Harry agreed. "I don't think Azkaban's got much to do with it. This hatred of everything Dark was created as a result of how poorly his parents treated him. He despised his parents, and everything they stood for. I remind him too much of his parents. I probably remind him quite a bit of Regulus, which made the fact that I was in his room, musing about how similar the two of us really are, even more disturbing. I just hope he can get over it, because he was my Dad's best friend, and his is a wand I want at my back."

Ginny scowled. "I just don't have the urge to give him that chance, Harry. He's already blown a number of opportunities. I didn't really understand the way he felt about things when I met him in the cave. Living with him for over two weeks has given me an appreciation for his true feelings about you. He's been nothing but a selfish bastard, Harry, to me and to you. He actually accused me of corrupting you, you know, and tried to bring my family into it when I told him he was nutters."

"Ironical, seeing as I was the one once accused, loudly and repeatedly, of sinking my corrupting Slytherin hooks into the innocent Ginevra Weasley and ripping her away from her Gryffindor destiny," Harry remarked dryly.

Ginny giggled. "It sounds so much more *absurd* when you say it like that. Speaking of my brother, has he come out of his room since Harry got here?"

"Outside of eating and doing chores around the house, no," Hermione said. "My room is right next to his," she added by way of explanation. "The twins are also staying in there. They create an amazing racket sometimes."

"Genius at work," Harry commented. Another giggle from Ginny.

"Right," Hermione said, clearly not amused.

"Come on, Hermione, they are both absolutely barmy, and quite destructive, but they are amazingly talented," Ginny argued.

"Maybe so, but perhaps they might consider using those talents for something useful," Hermione sniffed.

"Harry! Mum's using Polyjuice to impersonate Hermione!" Ginny cried in mock alarm. Harry snorted. Hermione glared at both of them.

"If you are quite finished having fun at my expense," Hermione said. "You might consider taking things a bit more seriously."

"Pardon my language, but what crawled up your arse and died?" Ginny asked. "We're just joking around because it makes it easier to forget everything that's going on out there. We're both perfectly aware that it's no joking matter. But at the moment, neither one of us wants to think about it."

"I was also talking about Harry's upcoming O.W.L.s," Hermione said stiffly. "But I take your point." Her voice softened a little, and something glistened behind those chocolate-brown eyes.

"Hermione, I'll be fine. I'll start revising mid-term, and we'll both earn perfect scores. How does that sound?"

"Smashing, if you can pull it off," Hermione said. She sighed. "I'm sorry. I really am. I just...I don't know how to *deal* with all of this, so I just go right into studying, because that makes me more comfortable." Harry could now see that Hermione was re-reading their Third-Year Transfiguration textbook.

"It's alright, Hermione," Ginny said softly. "We're all trying to deal with the stress and the anxiety in our own way. Mine's humor and sarcasm, yours is studying, and..."

"Mine's training," Harry finished, rising to his feet. "Speaking of which, I probably should be getting some more practice in, tightening up my defensive spells. Daphne wants to test them soon."

Ginny looked unhappy. "Come on, Harry, we've barely seen any of you this summer. It can wait. Come over here and help me with my Potions essay. Snape's practically written these instructions in Bulgarian." Harry noted with amusement that Hermione's cheeks took on a slight pink tinge at Ginny's choice of words.

He sat down next to his girlfriend, gave her a quick peck on the cheek, and then began reading the familiar words of his Potions Professor.

Ginny Weasley moved slowly through one of the long hallways of 12 Grimmauld Place, trying to navigate her through the maze of twists and turns. She'd been sent to Walburga Black's room by her mother to retrieve some cleaning supplies she'd left up there from an earlier attempt at disinfecting the room, an attempt that had ultimately proved unsuccessful. Now she was attempting to get back down to the kitchen, where her mother was cooking dinner. Last she'd heard, Harry was working with Daphne, Tonks, and Kingsley Shacklebolt. Hermione hadn't woken up yet for an afternoon nap, the twins were visiting Lee Jordan, and she didn't have any desire to talk to Ron, who was moping in one of the sitting rooms.

The corridor she was in was dark, and she passed forbidding doors at regular intervals. Black Manor was truly enormous, even larger than the ancestral home of the Dresslers, where she'd once been a guest. Then, abruptly, Ginny came to a stop. She could see light shining out beneath a door ahead of her. Curious, she moved closer, and heard a pair of voices. One male, one female. The door was slightly ajar, so she halted just before the door frame and listened intently.

"...I might have known you didn't mean well for him, Dressler," a voice she recognized as Snape's snarled angrily. "But I thought you'd at *least* have the sense to dispose of the body!"

Ginny froze. *Body? Daphne? Oh no...*

"You *should* have assumed that Avery was a dead man from the moment you told me where and when they were meeting, Snape," Daphne replied coldly. "You know what he did, and you know what has already become of the others. He deserved nothing less."

There was a pause. "Does it bother you, Dressler, that you kill so easily? Does it bother you that you own ward doesn't even know the things you have done?"

"Don't bring him into this, Snape," she warned. "This is to remain secret between you and me. I don't want Dumbledore learning of it either. He wouldn't understand."

"No, I daresay the Headmaster would *not* understand the cold-blooded killing of a man that may or may not have killed your husband thirteen years ago."

"The man was a psychopath, Snape. You know it as well as me. He was a conscience-free killer; a sadistic and barbaric criminal. The world's better off without him. Do you know that most of those he interrogated committed *suicide*? Every last woman that survived her ordeal with him took her own life."

"I do not doubt that Avery was an *abominable* excuse for a human being," Ginny's Head of House shot back. "I am merely questioning your killing the man. Had you bested him in a duel to the death, your actions could be defended. What you did was nothing more or less than an *assassination*."

"So it was. You are hardly one to be waxing poetic on *morals*, Severus."

"I was not doing anything of the sort, *Daphne*."

"Funny, it sounded like you were. Do we have anything further to discuss?"

"The Dark Lord is suspicious. He knows that Avery was betrayed. If he should find out that it was me..."

"You'll suffer the fate that you deserve. One that you would have earned some years ago if not for Lily's compassion."

"What I did was unforgivable, Dressler. I will not deny that. But that said, you have no right to see me dead for it. I was drunk. I was fifteen years old."

"See if Remus and Sirius care."

Snape made a disgusted noise. "Somehow, I doubt it will matter much to them. You are a vindictive bitch, Daphne."

"And you are a spiteful, ruthless bastard, Severus."

"At least we're agreed on something."

"Is there anything else? Besides your false concern for my mental state?"

"No."

Ginny was already moving as she heard the footsteps. The Silencing Charms she'd whispered allowed her to get out of sight before Daphne or Snape saw her. She finally stopped, leaning against the wall, desperately trying to calm her heart, which was beating so hard it threatened to break free of her chest. She couldn't believe the conversation she'd just overheard. She was confused and frightened. She'd seen what Daphne was capable of before, but she now knew that it was not just a one-time thing. Her murder of Avery had been *premeditated*.

She's a monster, Ginny declared in her mind. *She's sick, she's twisted, and she's unbalanced. She needs help, badly.*

She could find Harry and tell him everything. Shatter any remaining illusions he might have about his guardian, convince him to support her efforts to get Daphne treated. Make him understand that the Grey Maiden had fallen into Darkness, and that the price was already being paid in blood.

"I *can't*," she moaned silently. "I can't do that to him. Not after all he's been through." She'd seen them together, seen the way that Harry looked to Daphne for advice and comfort. He'd be torn apart if he lost her. And if his girlfriend *took* her away from him...

Well, I can probably forget about the "girlfriend" part, if he reacts that way, Ginny thought morosely.

She'd remain silent. For Harry's sake, and perhaps for her own. But she knew that she'd never be able to look Daphne Dressler in the eyes again.

Harry raced down the stairs, a hard, determined look on his face. Ahead of him, Ginny squealed in equal parts delight and mock-terror as she struggled to stay ahead of him. He continued to pursue her through the house, feet pounding on the floors of 12 Grimmauld Place. Finally, she reached one of the doors that led into the downstairs kitchen. To her obvious dismay, it was still locked from the last Order meeting that had been held in there, and she didn't have time to use an Unlocking Charm before her boyfriend was on her.

Harry pushed her against the wall, and crushed his lips upon hers, engaging her in what was probably their most passionate snog to date. It was an appropriate occasion, he decided, as she unsurprisingly took the initiative and deepened the kiss. It was August 11th, and more importantly, Ginny's 14th birthday. She'd taken off the instant she saw him prowling toward her and Hermione in the Library, a feral grin on his face. Hermione had burst out laughing as her friends disappeared down the dark and winding corridors of Black Manor.

Finally, as Harry began to get dizzy from a lack of oxygen, they broke the kiss, and both of them grinned stupidly at the other, finding it difficult to muster any words. Ginny managed to find her voice first. "Wow."

Harry's grin got broader, and he kissed her again.

While Harry still felt their relationship was probably more emotional than physical, it couldn't be denied that a combination of separation, hormones, and a growing comfort level when they were together had led to a few more of these snogging sessions than he'd expected. Not that either one of them regretted it, of course.

Harry had been at 12 Grimmauld place for slightly less than two weeks now, training, doing homework, and just spending time with his friends, time he knew might be difficult to come by in the busy year ahead of him. So for his part, he'd made the decision that he was

going to enjoy every moment they had together. Hermione, as far as he could tell, didn't seem to mind the change in Harry and Ginny's relationship, although she made it a point to be elsewhere when things got...physical. Harry had by now told his friends all about the letters he'd received, and they'd spent many hours discussing the repercussions of some of the new relationships Harry had established. Both had been pleased by Susan Bones's letter, but Hermione wasn't as pleased with Harry's promise to schedule an interview with Rita Skeeter, although they'd eventually won her over. As usual, she'd appeared a bit cold when Blaise was discussed. Harry and Ginny had talked about that, too, and they were undecided as to the cause of the tension between them. Ginny made a snarky comment about Muggleborn Gryffindor bookworm and the pampered, idealistic Slytherin being hopelessly in love, but neither one of them believed that to be the case, not by a long shot. They could only hope it wouldn't be too much of a problem in the coming year.

The Order had been busy, although Harry was a bit irritated by the way he was being shut out. Daphne was still telling him more than the others would have him know, but his lack of participation, on the absurd basis that he was too young, was wearing on him. Daphne had told him that Hestia Jones had recently returned from a reconnaissance trip on the continent, and delivered a rather disturbing report on Voldemort's recruitment efforts, which were making alarming progress. It seemed their fears about central Europe being a source of a new army for the Dark Lord had been justified. The mood at Headquarters was rather depressing, actually. Daphne had actually said that some were privately starting to wonder if it might even be possible to win this war, without the support of the Ministry. Fudge remained resolute in his denial of Voldemort's return, saying that there was no evidence to suggest the existence of any threat to public safety.

They had to come up for air again, and this time Harry spoke. "Happy Birthday, Gin," he said softly. "Like your present?"

"You better have gotten me more than a little snog from my boyfriend, Mr. Boy-Who-Lived," Ginny replied snobbishly. "That's something I ought to be able to get any day I feel like it."

"Never pegged you as the materialistic type," Harry admitted.

"We all have our secrets, don't we?" was Ginny's response, her brown eyes sparkling mischievously. She also pushed him back with surprising force, and he soon found his own back to the opposite wall as she stood on her tiptoes and began her own assault. Harry bent down to give her better access. Both of them had gotten taller over the summer, but Harry still had about a head on the petite redhead. Her hands moved to his back, and he countered by burying one hand in her hair and cupped her cheek with the other.

Sadly, they were interrupted by a cry of disgust from somewhere up the hallway. Reluctantly, Harry broke the kiss and turned his head to glare at the tall, gangly redhead that had disturbed their snogging session. Ginny flashed her brother an impish grin. "Sorry, Ron, were we bothering you somehow?"

Harry joined in. "Yeah, if you'd rather we did this somewhere else, there are all those empty bedrooms on the 3rd floor." Ginny giggled at the implications, though she also went red. As much as Harry knew that tormenting Ron was utterly juvenile, there was something about it that was irresistible. Karmic payback, he supposed.

Ron was clearly doing his best not to yell at both of them, and had settled for holding his breath. His skin had taken on a rather unhealthy-looking color. "Must you two be all over each other like that?" he hissed. "It's revolting!"

"Ron's just jealous," Ginny explained to him. "The best kiss he's ever had was from Auntie Muriel."

Ron's face picked up a tinge of green. "That's just disgusting, Ginny," he said. Harry was somewhat surprised he was handling this so well. It seemed that the boy might actually be starting to grow up, if such a thing were indeed possible. He'd taken no part in the Slytherin-bashing of Sirius, despite the man's best efforts, and done his best to avoid Harry and his friends whenever possible. It was a considerable improvement over his past behavior.

"Doesn't make it any less true," Ginny persisted. "I promise Ron, if you ever get a girlfriend, we'll let the two of you snog in public to your heart's content."

"Do you really think we ought to be agreeing to that?" Harry asked her in a whisper. Unpleasant mental images were flashing through his mind. Including one of Ron and...*oh god...*Hermione. *Not in a million years*, he told himself.

"Quiet, you!" she hissed.

Ron had settled on just glaring at both of them. Ginny had turned so that she was now leaning back against Harry's chest, his arms wrapped around her stomach. "I'm doing my best to tolerate you, Potter. But you're snogging my fourteen-year old sister right in front of me."

"And I assure you that I appreciate your efforts," Harry replied. "That said, it's not your business what Ginny and I do with one another. She's not a baby, Weasley."

Ron bit back a retort of some sort. Harry was actually impressed by his self-control. "Can we please just drop this?" then he turned to glare at his sister. "And for your information, I do have feelings for someone. A girl." Harry got the sense he regretted saying it from the second it passed his lips.

"Oh?" Ginny asked, merciless. "Do tell?"

Ron looked at her as if she'd grown an extra head. "Like I'd tell *you*! You'd make my life a bloody nightmare, not that you aren't already. It's none of your business."

"If I'm right about this, than it most certainly *is* my business," Harry countered.

Ginny looked confused for a moment, glancing back up at him. "What? Who? Oh...OH!" she exclaimed. "*Hermione*? You actually have feelings for *Hermione*? You actually think..."

"Not in a million years, not if you were the last man left on this planet, not if I had to impale myself on a flagpole if I refused, Ronald Weasley," Harry's aforementioned best friend said loudly, pushing through the apparently now unlocked kitchen door. Her blazing eyes met his. "Look at me, Ron. It. Isn't. Happening. You think that after all you've done, everything you've subjected me to, I could actually feel anything of the sort for you?"

Ron's face had turned red. "Of course not," he said through gritted teeth. "You hate me Hermione, and I'm well aware of that."

"So why do you persist in these delusional fantasies?" she demanded. "Oh, I've noticed the way you look at me, Ronald. The looks you threw at Krum at the Yule Ball, those oh-so-blatant peeks in my direction when you think I'm not looking. Bloody hell, even *Parvati* knows about it, and that girl's as thick as polar ice."

Ron seemed frozen, unable to speak, perhaps because Hermione had just sworn at him. Harry decided to take pity on his former rival. To be fair, he'd been forced to give away something he'd wanted very badly kept secret, and Ginny wasn't giving him a break. It was payback for the way he'd treated her in the past, payback rightly deserved, but Harry couldn't help but feel sorry for him nonetheless. He gently pushed Ginny away from him, disentangling himself and moving to stand beside her. "That's enough," he said. "Ron didn't ask for this. Give him a break."

Harry could see the shock in Ginny's eyes as he defended the boy that had done his utmost to make his life a living hell just a few years ago, but he also saw the approval in Hermione's gaze. Ron looked pretty well floored that Harry was actually coming to his defense. The four of them stood there, awkwardly, until they heard Mrs. Weasley loudly calling them for dinner.

Hermione astutely took Ginny by the arm and led the protesting redhead inside, leaving Harry and Ron alone in the hallway. Ron cleared his throat. "Thanks, Potter."

"You can't change the way you feel about people," Harry said by way of explanation. He sighed, closing his eyes. "Look," he said, meeting Ron's gaze. "I'm never going to forget the things you did in my First

and Second Years. You were a right bastard, to me, to Hermione, and especially to Ginny, your own sister. But the thing is, I think you know that now. I think you realize that you were a complete arse, and you are trying to make things right. It's just difficult because I haven't exactly done much to make you like me. Indeed, I've tormented quite a bit myself, exacting revenge for the past, I suppose."

Ron simply nodded, but then managed a few words. "I'm sorry, Potter. I still don't really like you, but what I did to you wasn't deserved or fair. You're right, I really was an arse, a total git. To Neville, too, I suppose. Seems like he's found a home with you, at least."

"He has," Harry admitted. "I'm grateful for your apology." Harry took a deep breath. "Ron...we're never going to be friends. There's far too much bad blood between us, and it's not all in the past, is it? But we don't have to be enemies, going around trying to find reasons to hate each other."

"No, we don't," Ron agreed. He sighed tiredly. "Pot...Harry," he corrected, responding to Harry's use of his given name, "I don't really approve of the way you go about things. I mean, you've *admitted* you are learning the Dark Arts."

"I'm not going to deny that I've been learning some spells classified as Dark. I haven't begun practicing any rituals involving human sacrifice or anything like that."

Ron groaned. "Not helping." Harry winced.

"Sorry."

"Whatever...maybe...maybe I'm just not sure I really like the kind of person that you are, or the kind of person Ginny's become. And I suppose that while you might have had something to do with it, it's not fair to blame you for it, either. I mean, she's made her own choices."

"She has," Harry said. "Like the decision to enter into a relationship with me."

Ron sighed again. "I'm sure I'm ever going to get used to that part. Seeing you two snogging just brings up all kinds of ridiculous protective instincts in me."

"I have to commend the job you did keeping your head through all of that," Harry said. "You would have blown up at us in the past."

"I've changed, Harry," Ron said. "At least, I hope I have. I know that I'm at least *trying* to change. After seeing what you went through last year, hearing the whole story from Ginny, seeing you lying there on the Pitch, looking, well...dead, I think I decided that I really didn't like being the kind of person that would pick on somebody like you just to make themselves feel better. Actually, I decided that I really *hated* being that person."

"I'm glad you've finally seen the light, as it were," Harry said. "If not friends, then...acquaintances?" he asked, sticking out his hand.

Ron took it. "I can deal with that, I guess." His grip was firm and unyielding. Harry stared into the eyes of Ginny's brother and saw nothing but genuine honesty and determination.

"We ought to join the girls inside, or they might think we've killed each other," Ron commented lightly. Then his stomach gave a loud rumble.

Harry grinned. "Sounds like a Molly Weasley meal might be just what you need right now."

"Yeah," Ron managed, before his stomach gave another tremendous growl.

And with their difference resolved for the time being, the Gryffindor and the Slytherin entered the kitchen together. As they walked in side-by-side, Hermione's smile could have warmed the coldest of hearts.

"Harry, are you *sure*?" his guardian asked for what was probably the tenth time in the last ten minutes.

"Yes," he almost hissed at her. "Daphne, I know you want to be there, but I really prefer that it was just the two of us in there. I can fill you in on any important details later. Just let me handle this on my own."

Daphne opened her mouth to say something, then shut it, and Harry knew he'd won. It was a tremendous relief. Getting Ginny and Hermione to allow him to discuss the events of two months ago had been difficult enough. Even *McGonagall* had asked to be present. Daphne forced a look of passive resignation onto her face, and gestured towards the fireplace. Harry moved to it, reaching into pail hanging from a nail over the hearth and pulling out a pinch of Floo Powder. He tossed it into the roaring fireplace, and the flames flashed emerald green. He took a deep breath, then stepped into the flames. "Dumbledore's Office," he said clearly.

A rush of color and sound later, and he was ejected through a large and ornate fireplace, skidding to a halt but managing to stay on his feet this time. Harry brushed himself off and walked out of Dumbledore's sitting room, emerging into his cavernous office. The venerable Headmaster sat at his desk, blue eyes twinkling with amusement. Harry had in the past suspected that the twinkling might be an indication that the man was using Legilimency, but he was no longer certain of that fact. He could feel it when someone pushed at his developing shields. He felt nothing now. Dumbledore was an eighth Demiguise, which explained his ability to turn invisible without the aid of a cloak or Disillusionment Charm. "So, you came alone, as promised? Lemon drop?" he offered.

"It wasn't easy," Harry admitted, moving to the front of the desk. Dumbledore wandlessly conjured a chair, and Harry sat, staring up at the much older man. "And no thank you."

"Very well. You have fine friends, Harry," Dumbledore told him. "That they were reluctant to allow you to be alone for this meeting demonstrates how much they care for you."

"I've been blessed in that regard," Harry said. It was true that although his life story had a tendency to read like one of unending pain and woe, he'd survived it all because of the people had stood firmly beside him during his darkest moments. True, he'd nearly had

to be killed by a troll before he gained Hermione's trust, but the friendship he'd developed with her had proven to be crucial over the next few years. The fact that she was there was one of the few things that made him certain that he wanted to go back to Hogwarts. That, and he wasn't about to let Malfoy and Weasley...*Ron*, he corrected himself, get the better of him.

Harry sometimes wished he could live a normal life, or at least one without the pain and suffering he was forced to endure as he tried to fill a role that he wasn't yet ready to take again and again, but somehow, he wasn't sure a quiet life would make him all that happy either. *Be nice if I didn't have to live my entire life in fear that someone might be lurking around the next corner, ready to slit my throat*, he mused.

He saw that Dumbledore was staring at him now, a curious and yet amused expression on his face. "Sorry," Harry said, clearing his throat. "Got lost in my thoughts."

"I assure you that it happens to the best of us, my boy," Dumbledore said kindly. "Especially for one with as...interesting a life as yours."

Harry was pretty sure Dumbledore hadn't used Legilimency. It was quite possible he'd just guessed. Harry wasn't very skilled at hiding his emotions, although he'd learned to conceal them in public, and to quickly recover his blank mask of indifference, and wasn't on his guard in the Headmaster's presence. Although Harry didn't always agree with his methods, the man had his best interests at heart, and, to his credit, he'd given Harry a remarkable amount of leniency and autonomy. He respected Harry, and that meant something. Dumbledore had essentially admitted that he saw a great deal of himself in the Boy-Who-Lived. Indeed, he was the Dumbledore of this generation. Harry was the most powerful wizard of his age, destined to combat the most powerful Dark Lord of his time. The same description would have applied to Dumbledore fifty years ago. Although Dumbledore had also been quite a bit older than Harry was when he was asked to face his destiny. Harry had never learned what Dumbledore had done with himself in the first half of his exceptionally long life. He'd been a drifter, seeking to learn everything but vacant of real purpose. But that was all that he knew. Regardless, he'd had

over half a century to mature into a war leader. Harry had less than a third of that.

As Snape might say, *Deal with it. Life's not fair.*

If there was any lesson that Harry had learned well in his life, it was that one.

Dumbledore had again left him to his thoughts. Absently, he popped another Lemon Drop into his mouth.

"I'm going to assume you asked me here to discuss my confrontation with Voldemort," Harry finally said. The old man nodded. The twinkle had vanished. Dumbledore's face was tired and weary. Harry couldn't really blame him for being depressed and fatigued by the constant fighting, the widespread loss of innocence that came with any war. And he knew that Dumbledore, fairly or unfairly, held himself responsible for a great deal of the pain suffered under his watch.

"Your suspicions are correct," the Headmaster said. "I have spent a great deal of time studying the Pensieve memory you gave us, Harry. The first time that I watched it, I must admit I saw things that I've never seen before in my life. And so I've studied that record, consulting every resource that I can, from the most respected to the most obscure. And, truth be told, I'm afraid all I have to offer as explanations are little more than educated guesses. I might have expected the battle between Tom and you to remind me of my final confrontation with Lord Grindelwald, but alas, that was not the case."

"Where do you want to start?" Harry asked. He steeled his expression, trying to keep his thinking level and rational. The memories of what had happened in the graveyard were still fresh in his mind, and indeed he'd been haunted by nightmares so ferocious that they overcame his improving Occlumency skills. He could only shiver at the thought of his nights without the mind-calming aid he'd received from Snape, as exhausting and brutal as the process could be.

"The beginning is fairly straightforward. With the capture and death of Barty Crouch Junior, Tom lost his agent within Hogwarts. His primary goal was, of course, to bring you to him for the resurrection ceremony, though he also wanted to test you, to see what you were capable of

and what you were willing to do in the right, or wrong, situation,” Dumbledore said.

“And if I died in the process, then I was clearly never a real threat to him, and he might as well just use the blood of any person that could be considered an enemy,” Harry said.

“Yes. And that list is a very long one indeed. It seems that Tom decided to risk one of his few loyal followers to accomplish his original mission. Alecto Carrow snuck onto the Grounds, ambushed your guardian, and turned the Tri-Wizard Cup into a Portkey. The plan, I suspect, was for her to impersonate Daphne until you were dead, after which she’d slip away in the confusion. Of course, things didn’t go as planned.”

“I survived, managed to get back to the Portkey, and Daphne woke up. She then tried to poison me to finish the job, but Daphne killed her,” Harry summarized.

Dumbledore nodded. “A rather simple plan, by Tom’s standards.”

“Daphne’s blamed herself for failing to protect me, of course,” Harry said.

Dumbledore’s nod was slow and solemn this time. “That is hardly fair. Daphne’s bloodline carries an ability to detect the magical signatures of other wizards, Alecto’s carried an ability to conceal it.”

“I know that. You think that Voldemort was aware of that fact when he sent her?”

Dumbledore shrugged. “He may have been. I’m not sure he had much choice in the matter. He couldn’t send Pettigrew. And it seems that Bellatrix’s escape was set to coincide with the beginning of the Third Task, to deflect attention.”

“I’d *really* love to know how they pulled *that* one off,” Harry remarked.

Dumbledore didn’t immediately respond. Harry was surprised by the rage he saw lurking behind the old wizard’s blue eyes. “A case of blatant incompetence and complacency,” Dumbledore finally said.

"The Dementors had re-affirmed loyalty to Tom the moment he arrived in England. They allowed Bellatrix to escape, and a traitorous prison guard arranged transport. That man is now dead."

"You seem quite angry."

"I am," Dumbledore admitted. "If ignoring the implications of your ordeal was bad enough, this was worse. The most heavily guarded and dangerous of Voldemort's incarcerated followers somehow managed to escape undetected, and within the hour was back at her master's side. One of the men guarding her, whose loyalties have been questioned in the past, vanishes from the island without explanation, and is then found three days later by Muggle police near the coast, the victim of a Killing Curse. The Dementors did not react in the slightest to her escape. Indeed, it seems they resisted the first efforts of the Ministry garrison to mobilize them to search the island. But Cornelius refuses to accept that these events are connected. Indeed, he's devoted more attention to the murder of Thomas Avery than to the possible return of the man that nearly brought the wizarding world to its knees fourteen years ago."

"You said the guard's loyalties had been questioned?"

Dumbledore gave him a grin smile. "I should have suspected you'd pick up on that. The deceased guard was named Logan Young."

Harry frowned. "Am I supposed to recognize that name?"

"Of course not. It's a common enough name. The problem is that in the course of the *brief* investigation, they found something quite interesting. Logan Young was born Travis Mulciber, the younger brother of incarcerated Death Eater Thomas Mulciber, and wanted fugitive Lysandra Mulciber, who fled to Austria to escape capture by the Ministry and hasn't been seen in thirteen years."

"That's...that's..."

"Outrageous? Indicative of terrible incompetence? Absurd, but true?"

"Take your pick," Harry breathed.

“Indeed,” Dumbledore said, his voice harsh. “Cornelius is up for re-election in two years, but I fear for what might become of the wizarding world in that time.”

Harry bit back a recommendation that they deal with the blundering fool by themselves. Fudge had too many allies in the Ministry, including many heavily influential Light purebloods, whose allegiance was based out of family ties and convenience than real faith in the man’s abilities. Aiden Greengrass could be a powerful weapon, but he couldn’t bring down the Minister by himself. For the time being, there was nothing they could do. *Besides, who’d replace him? And how long would it take them to weed out Fudge’s lackeys?* It might be possible to strip Fudge of support by carefully exposing his gross incompetence, but if they moved too fast, Fudge would panic. They’d have to take him out then, else risk irreversible damage to the war effort, and Harry wasn’t sure there was anyone they could trust ready to take on the position.

Amelia Bones was a possibility. A strong-willed and dedicated Light witch, she’d had a distinguished tenure as Head of the Department of Magical Law enforcement. But she wasn’t all that well liked by the people working behind the scenes. There was Alexander Smith, the newly promoted (or demoted, depending on the way you looked at it) Head of the Department for Magical Cooperation, a Ministry veteran and the uncle of Ginny’s Hufflepuff classmate Zacharias Smith. Daphne had described him in fairly glowing terms, and the man was a staunch ally of Dumbledore. Fudge hated him, which is why he’d been passed over for the job that now belonged to Susan’s aunt, and been shunted around four or five departments since Fudge had taken office. Most recently, he’d capably handled the challenging job of being the Coordinator of the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad, which included the Ministry’s Obliviators.

Finally, there was Rufus Scrimgeour, better known as “the Lion.” A tireless, determined man of great intelligence and magical ability, Scrimgeour was an effective administrator, held a passionate hatred for the Dark Arts, and was a skillful manipulator and outstanding politician. He’d grudgingly allowed Daphne to serve as an expert instructor for the Aurors the previous year, though she’d quit after the Third Task. Scrimgeour would be exceedingly unpopular with Harry’s

Dark allies unless the man might be persuaded to moderate his extremist views in the interests of cooperation that might lead to the defeat of Voldemort. But he was also clearly the most qualified man for the job. The Bloody Baron had said he was one of the finest Slytherins ever to grace the dungeons of Hogwarts. *Now that is high praise*, Harry thought.

"Pondering the political future of the wizarding world?" Dumbledore asked. Harry nodded. "Bleak, isn't it?"

"I see a few strong candidates, but Fudge won't go anywhere until he's forced to," Harry answered. "He's already worried about the possibility of people moving against him, to the point where he's tried to discredit you in the press. He's terrified by the thought of you becoming a political rival."

"Yes, he is," Dumbledore agreed. "His fears are unfounded, of course. I have lived well over a century, Harry, and I have had more than my fill of politics. I have no wish to lead the entire wizarding world, to manage the convoluted and corrupt collection of individuals known as the Ministry of Magic. Though I suspect it might not be the same for you."

Harry shrugged. "Haven't really thought about it, honestly. It would be quite a ways off, and certainly not before Voldemort was defeated. That's the only goal I can afford to focus on. The future will attend to itself."

"Perhaps," Dumbledore replied. "There were other things I wished to discuss."

"Such as what happened with our wands?"

"That was one of them, yes. As you are no doubt aware, your wands share cores, feathers from the same phoenix...*this* phoenix, to be precise," Dumbledore said, gesturing at Fawkes, who sat warily, perched on a stand in the corner of the room. Harry hadn't actually been aware of the source of the feathers.

"Shared wand cores are quite rare," Harry said. "And from what I understand, they are quite unpredictable."

Again, Dumbledore nodded. "In this case, it seems that your wand resisted having to fight its brother, and vice versa. Hence the formation of a connection, one that ended the duel in progress. What happened after that, even I don't fully understand. Some sort of magical charge began to build up in the connection, and eventually drifted your way. You panicked, and tried to push it back. Tom countered your move by releasing some of his own magic. Nothing of real consequence happened until they touched."

"Then everything just went straight to hell," Harry finished.

"Indeed. Such an explosion requires tremendous power on both sides, as well as a fundamental opposition to the magic of the other. Though it would seem that Tom's magic reflects his commitment to the most foul of the Dark Arts, your own essence was not quite as revealing."

"Perhaps it reflects my indecision," Harry said. "Technically I'm loyal to the Light, but I use Dark Magic when it serves my needs."

"More than that, you seem to possess an affinity for the Dark Arts. It is possible that, although you managed to purge Riddle's stain from the magic you absorbed from his diary, his proclivity for the Dark Arts remained."

"Makes sense," Harry said. "I'm from a Light family, and I didn't really start using Dark Magic until well after Riddle's possession and the subsequent power increase that I experienced at the end of my Second Year. There's no reason for my magic to be better suited to the Dark Arts unless...unless it isn't really *my* magic."

"Exactly," Dumbledore said. "It seems that we have drawn the same conclusions, Harry. If you don't mind telling me, how do you feel about that?"

"What, my strength when it comes to using the Dark Arts?" Harry asked. Dumbledore nodded. Harry shrugged. "Honestly, I don't know. As a Slytherin, the practical value of anything is far more important to me than its moral virtue, or anything like that. If it works, and I can use it to help my own cause, keep myself alive, and ultimately win this war, I see no reason to question it. It is what it is, and wishing it

were any different is an unproductive and potentially harmful waste of time.”

Dumbledore studied him for a long moment, saying nothing. He wasn't using his magic, merely his physical powers of observation. “If that is truly how you feel, then I see no reason to interfere or question your judgment. I merely warn you, Harry, that the Dark Arts may bring you great power, but they can also carry a terrible price. The lure of power is often what leads to corruption, to an individual straying from the path they started out walking. In addition, the association of the Dark Arts with our more negative emotions: fear, anger, hatred, spite, and the like, can do damage in their own ways. Finally, the Dark Arts are most often used to inflict pain and suffering on others.”

Dumbledore fell silent for a moment, gathering his words. Harry waited patiently.

“Harry, I care for you deeply, and not merely because you are the son of two of my favorite pupils. You have endured far more than one your age could be expected to survive, and have indeed grown stronger because of it. You have taken on a monumental task with the best of intentions. You have shown a capacity to help those cast aside by others, to be kind and compassionate, as well as cunning and manipulative. It is those virtues that give me confidence that you might resist the lure of the Darkness, and be the first powerful Dark wizard in quite some time that acts in the interest of the public good. I warn you to be aware of your emotions and the consequences of your actions not because I am afraid of you or disapprove of the path you have chosen to walk. I warn you because I don't want to see you fall, to see you fail. Because if you do fall, Harry, others will pay the price. Such is always the case when a witch or wizard of your strength embraces the darker side of his nature. You must understand this.”

Harry swallowed. “I do. Believe me, Professor, I do. And it frightens me, how easy it might be to fall as Riddle fell. But he didn't fall because he was Dark, Professor. He fell because he cares for no one but himself.”

“And it is that capacity to love, to care for others, that sets you apart, Harry,” Dumbledore said, smiling proudly. “You care as deeply for your friends as they care for you. Tom has never known love. He was orphaned as a child, had no real friends at Hogwarts, only followers. He does not understand what it means to love, or to be loved. He hates it because he has never known it. And that is his greatest weakness.”

“Perhaps,” Harry said. “I’d say that his arrogance might also be a great flaw. He assumes that he is superior to all others, that he is meant to rule the wizarding world, maybe even the Muggle world. He makes errors, even admits to making them, but he does not learn from them.”

“An astute observation,” Dumbledore agreed. “But I might say that modesty is not necessarily your own greatest virtue, Harry.”

Harry could do little but grudgingly accept that he was right. And that perhaps Voldemort’s inability to love was the weakness he’d best find ways to exploit.

Dumbledore had already defeated a Dark Lord in his lifetime. Harry didn’t always agree with him, but it didn’t change the fact that his opinion was one to be respected.

Chapter 3: Between the Darkness and the Light

The five men and one woman assembled in the well-furnished parlor were some of the most influential in the wizarding world. All of them were from old, or at least distinguished pureblood families, all with an unquestioned loyalty to the Dark. All of them were familiar with the others in the room, as most of them had served together on the Pureblood Advisory Council for many years. That group, made up of about sixty individuals, was controlled by the Light families by a 2-1 advantage, accurately reflecting the real-life demographic split. The Council was as old as the Ministry itself, and had, with varying degrees of competency, represented the interests of the old wizarding families over the centuries. It had once been much larger, and most certainly, more prominent. These days, to the dismay of most of those gathered in the room, the Light purebloods seemed to make it their mission to ensure that absolutely nothing ever got done during the monthly meetings with the Minister and his closest advisors. When the Dark purebloods had introduced a motion to prevent the passing of Arthur Weasley's Muggle Protection Act, the Light purebloods had postured, debated, and finally refused to vote on the issue. Without the required majority, the motion failed, and some nasty letters had been exchanged in the following months.

The noise level in the room was low, though it was steadily growing as the five guests talked amongst themselves, the host calmly sitting in an armchair, discretely watching and listening to the people he had invited into his home.

A young woman entered, carrying a tea tray. She wore a neat smock over simple black robes, her long blonde hair arranged in a single ponytail that ran down to the small of her back, her only adornment a pair of small diamond earrings and a golden bracelet on her right arm. Her stoic expression betrayed no emotion, nor did her cold blue eyes. She moved across the room with long, graceful strides, and gently set the tea tray down on the large table in the corner. She deftly poured six cups, leaving two empty ones in case more company arrived. She moved to the door, but not before glancing disinterestedly at the others in the room, and shooting her father a brief look of displeasure before she silently exited. The host allowed himself a small smile. It

might well have been the first, and quite possible the *last* time that Daphne Persephone Nilax Greengrass was reduced to the role of domestic servant. Unfortunately, the Greengrass family was one of the very few pureblood families to not own any house elves. They had paid servants to clean and maintain the house, but the host of this gathering had decided against allowing them to serve the guests. They had no business knowing anything that was discussed here, and he was not certain he could trust them not to accidentally, or even intentionally, reveal some sensitive and potentially damaging. He had no such concerns when it came to his only daughter.

The volume in the room was beginning to increase, and Aiden Heracles Edward Greengrass decided that his guests were now about as comfortable as they'd ever be. He got to his feet, and said loudly, "If you could all join me around the table for tea, I'd be quite grateful." Halfway through his sentence, all talking had stopped, and he adjusted his volume accordingly. The others quietly took their seats around the carved oak table that had been owned by the Greengrass family for many, many years before Aiden had been born. As they sat, they all took turns looking around the table, measuring each other.

Aiden tried not to show his disappointment that only five of the eight patriarchs and matriarchs that he'd invited were actually in attendance. Among the missing were Grindelia Parkinson, Aaron Wilkes, and most surprisingly, Arabella Zabini. He knew from Daphne that the Songstress's son had struck up a friendship with the Boy-Who-Lived the previous year. The absence of the boy's mother was puzzling.

No matter. It was a start, even if it wasn't as great of one as he had hoped. Aiden casually glanced around the table. Directly across from him, looking dignified and cold as arctic ice, was Grigory Ivanov. To the Russian ex-patriot's right was the imposing bulk of the only woman at the gathering, Lucretia Bulstrode. To his left, the composed Gavin Burke, a man with glittering eyes so dark they were almost black, a curved scar on his right cheek. His hands were on the table. On the underside of his (intentionally) exposed left forearm, just barely out of sight, was his Dark Mark. Just beyond the *former* servant of the Dark Lord was Samuel Davies, a handsome dark-

haired man who looked about fifteen years younger than he really was. And to Aiden's left, Karel Radetzky, a soft-spoken but brilliant man of Czech origin, though he was a third-generation Briton, and the wealthiest man at the gathering.

"Presumably, you called a gathering of the non-aligned Dark purebloods for a reason, Aiden," Burke began, finally breaking the silence. He allowed more than a little contempt to slip into his voice, trying to put the host on the defensive.

Aiden had more than a little experience dealing with such ploys. "I'd never request the honor of your presence if I did not feel it would be worth your while, Gavin," the former Gryffindor replied coolly. "That goes for all of you, of course."

"This wouldn't have anything to do with your rather dramatic announcement that you've entered into an alliance with the last of the Potters, would it?" Lucretia asked, although if she didn't already suspect that was true, Aiden would shove the ceremonial amulet he'd received from the Boy-Who-Lived to cement the alliance down his own throat. Subtlety was not the Bulstrode matriarch's strong suit. The Bulstrodes were an interesting family, in more than once sense. Old, rich, powerful – all of those things were true, but they were also a family without any clear allegiance, outside of the Dark itself. Pureblood supremacists, to be sure, but that didn't mean they'd necessarily support Voldemort. The Bulstrodes had a reputation for being ruthless, stubborn, and insanely calculating. They shied away from the spotlight and loathed being in the public view. Daphne reported that their second child, Millicent, was of reasonable intelligence, slightly above-average magical skill, and had a very secretive nature.

"As it turns out, it does," Aiden replied evenly.

"Surely you are not going to ask us to join in your terrible mistake?" Grigory rumbled from across the table. Aiden required effort to keep his face emotionless; his old friend's rather vehement reaction to allying with Potter had come as somewhat of a surprise. The man had told him repeatedly that showing his cards so early was a mistake, and served more to make him a target than to create a

banner for future allies of the Boy-Who-Lived to rally around. While somewhat impressed by Potter's maturity in their lone meeting the previous December, it was quite clear that the old Czarist was skeptical of Potter's chances of success. On the bright side, his twins seemed quite taken with Potter's ability and composure. Perhaps they might melt their father's frozen heart yet.

"I, of course, respect your opinion, old friend, but I still believe that you are mistaken. If Potter were not worthy of our attentions, would he have survived his encounter with the Dark Lord? If the stories we have all heard are to be believed."

Eyes shifted to the man at the table with the most experience dealing with the Dark Lord. Gavin gave an exaggerated sigh. "I renounced my loyalty to the Dark Lord some time ago, after I was ordered to commit certain...atrocities against other pureblood wizards. I came to realize that my faith in the Dark Lord as a defender of the rights of the old families to be misguided. I have even heard rumblings that the man is not of unblemished parentage himself."

"Those are more than rumors," Aiden said. *Ah, the value of research.* "Voldemort was born Tom Marvolo Riddle. His mother was named Merope Gaunt. The Gaunts are direct descendants of Salazar Slytherin himself, the only remaining line. But his father was no pureblood. He was a Muggle."

Lucretia hissed. "How dare you propagate such lies?"

Aiden spread his hands, giving a not-so-innocent smile. "I am merely a conduit for the truth, Lucretia. Others have told me these things, this is true. But like any good student of our ways, I did my own independent research."

"Surely if such a thing were a matter of public record, it would be better known," Samuel Davies drawled. Aiden hid a smile. The man tended to act like an arrogant fool of no substance, but that could not be further from the truth. He delighted in making others underestimate him.

"Ah, my dear Samuel, it *is* a matter of public record. You see, for all their shortcomings, Muggles are quite capable when it comes to

keeping records. It was not difficult to trace the lineage of the Gaunts, and there are not many women named Merope that lived in early 30s in rural England. The truth is there for any that wish to see it.”

“I fail to see the importance of this discussion,” Radetzky said. “This is not the first time that the Dark Lord has been shown to be a hypocrite. Only the weak follow any man out of a love of his ideals, his principles. The strong do not rely on such restraining notions. They act according to their own self-interest. And so while others die for what they believe in, and go to their grave believing they have made their lives worth something, the strong survive.” Aiden had known the man for years, and if there was a better latter-day embodiment of wizarding philosopher Nicholas Machiavelli, he’d very much like to meet him.

They had reached an impasse. It was the first, but in this meeting, it would most certainly not be the last.

Gavin spoke slowly, cautiously. “Perhaps we might allow Aiden to elaborate on his reasons for asking us here tonight? It is always best to hear such things from the horse’s mouth.”

Aiden nodded at the ex-Death Eater. “Very well. I asked you here not necessarily because I’d like to see you swear allegiance to Potter as I have chosen to do, but because I want to get a feel for where all of you stand. Like it or not, you will have to take a side sooner or later.”

“Ah, *this* argument again,” Lucretia sneered. “It’s time for the sob story about your poor wife and youngest daughter, isn’t it? We’ve heard your cautionary tale more than once, Aiden. Just because you were unable to escape the attentions of the Dark Lord, and paid the price for it, doesn’t mean we should put our heads on the chopping block and throw in our lot with Potter.”

Aiden did his best to keep his expression neutral. “Did you not hear what I said, Bulstrode?” he asked, his voice deadly calm. “I don’t have a sign-up sheet for becoming an ally of the Boy-Who-Lived. I’m not urging you to make a decision at the moment. But ignore the story of my family at your own peril.”

"Aiden is not merely trying to win sympathy, Lucretia," Burke interrupted. "The Dark Lord is nothing if not vengeful. If you defy him, he will come for you. And you cannot hide from him. Many have tried. All have failed. Even the Potters, protected by the best that Dumbledore and his Order of the Phoenix had to offer, were unable to escape him."

"I am not questioning the Dark Lord's ruthlessness, Gavin," Lucretia shot back. "I am merely suggesting that Aiden is seriously underestimating my own family and overestimating the reach and capabilities of the Dark Lord and his followers."

"And I am tempted to agree with her, Aiden," Davies said. "Although I must say I am concerned by how quickly the Dark Lord has begun to rebuild his forces."

"I can attest to this," Radetzky said, his voice quiet. "The Dark Lord has been aggressively recruiting all throughout Eastern and Central Europe, focusing on the pockets of small Dark families that are found throughout the area. The resentment from the way they lost the First War has not faded with time. Once again, there are many that never fought in the war that believe they could have won if just a few things had gone their way. It has festered. His efforts have been remarkably successful. Even now, plans are being made to set up training camps for the new recruits, far from the prying eyes of the Ministry of Magic. I will not join the Dark Lord. The man is a mad butcher, and has no business running any sort of government. But I am greatly concerned that he may be able to win this war by nothing more than the force of numbers."

"So you would commit yourself to a cause you say is already lost?" Lucretia asked.

"The cause is not lost," Grigory said, finally making his presence felt. "We are not the only ones that Potter will try to bring to his side. The Light purebloods, the Muggleborns and half-blooded students at Hogwarts, as well as the allies of Dumbledore will also be needed."

"So where is the need for us?" Davies demanded. "I will not be reduced to a secondary role, behind Mudbloods and cowardly Light wizards."

"You would join the Dark Lord?"

"I didn't say that, did I, Aiden?" Davies replied sharply.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, let's be realistic for a moment," Radetzky implored. "Do you really think Potter stands a chance with an army of half-trained Muggleborn and half-blood students, a handful of parents of half-bloods with little combat experience, Dumbledore's little band of spies and, with a few exceptions, mediocre-at-best duelists, and some of the Light purebloods, who haven't cast a spell in anger their entire lives?"

"He'll be crushed," Aiden said, his voice cold and hard. "He won't stand a chance without us, without our families. We offer him well-trained, combat-ready, powerful soldiers with which to combat Voldemort's best Death Eaters. And Karel, my friend, you seem to be forgetting the Aurors."

"Maybe a little less than a two hundred in number, almost no combat experience, far more adept at stunning than killing, and under the control of that idiot Fudge?" Radetzky scoffed. "Hardly a group capable of tipping the balance in Potter's favor."

"Karel is right," Gavin said. "Potter needs us. And not just us. He needs significantly more of the currently non-aligned Dark purebloods to take his side than take the Dark Lord's. Even then, if Karel's information is right, Voldemort's army will be massive, and that is only considering witches and wizards. What of the werewolves, the giants, the trolls, and the other bloodthirsty Dark creatures that will doubtless swear allegiance to him?"

"What of the Dementors?" Davies asked. "They will leave the Ministry in a heartbeat, if they haven't already."

"I believe that the escape of Bellatrix Lestrange tells us all we need to know about the alignment of those foul creatures, as well as the integrity and state of readiness of Fudge's Ministry," Aiden said quietly.

“So, to sum up: unless by some miracle he sways the lot of us, Potter’s doomed, and even if he does, he’ll still be outnumbered,” Lucretia said. “I thought you were on his side, Aiden?”

“Believe me, I am,” the Greengrass patriarch bit out.

“Oh yes, there is no doubt of that,” Grigory rumbled. “I’m afraid you have failed to convince me, old friend. I will not be the second to rally around Potter’s banner.”

Aiden sighed. If he hadn’t convinced Grigory, whom he’d known for many years, then he wasn’t likely to have convinced any of his assembled guests. “In that case, it seems that we’ve reached an impasse. You are welcome to take the tea with you if you so desire. Thank you for coming.”

With a collection of grumbling, the meeting broke up. Lucretia was the first to leave, followed by Grigory and Davies. Radetzky paused in the doorway, looking at Aiden with a strange expression on his face, before he too exited the parlor. That left, of all people, Gavin Burke, who had a strangely pensive look on his face.

“Do you wish to mock me further, Gavin?” Aiden asked.

The man laughed, his thoughtful façade shattering. “Oh, nothing of the sort, Aiden. Were you bluffing when you said you didn’t actually have a sign-up sheet? I do hope not.”

Aiden, try as he might, failed miserably at keeping the surprise from his face. “You can’t be serious.”

“Oh, I am,” the man with eyes of darkest obsidian said, his lips twisting upward into a cold smile. “Aiden, I am a traitor. I took the Mark as a young man, I served, and then I left. I was on the run when Potter destroyed the Dark Lord. Did you think perhaps that I might run right back to him, and beg his forgiveness? Did you really believe I’d stake my family’s lives on the mercy of the Dark Lord? Come now, Aiden, you know me better than that!”

“And Edwin?” Aiden asked, letting a little cautious optimism into his voice. Edwin Burke, like his brother, had attended Durmstrang

Academy, and upon graduation, joined his older brother in the ranks of the Death Eaters.

“Despite the fact that he has no family, he cares for himself as much as any I have ever known,” Gavin said. “And he’s told me more than once that if he were to die before his time, he was somewhat partial to going out in a blaze of glory. I can think of no better way to arrange that, can you?”

Aiden numbly shook his head. Of all the things he’d been expecting, *this* was not one of them.

“Excellent. I will consult with Edwin, and we will contact Potter at once concerning a formal alliance. I’m going to trust you were honest in your description of him as remarkably mature, somewhat ruthless, quite patient and cunning, open-minded about the Dark Arts, and very ambitious.”

“I was not dissembling in that letter, Gavin. I told you what I believed to be the truth.”

“Good. The irony is priceless, isn’t it? Two former Death Eater jumping at the chance to ally with the Boy-Who-Lived? Alas, war does make strange bedfellows...well then, good evening to you, Aiden! We shall speak again soon, I think.” And with that, he strode out of the parlor, leaving the still somewhat-dumbstruck Aiden Greengrass behind.

Strange bedfellows? You aren’t giving the fates nearly enough credit for coming up with the most bizarre scenario I could ever have imagined coming from this meeting, Gavin.

Shaking his head, Aiden moved out of the parlor, heading for his personal office. He was walking through one of the sitting rooms when he saw her standing in the dark, motionless. Puzzled, he called out to his daughter. “Daphne?”

She didn’t respond. More than a little concerned now, he moved quickly around to her front. Her eyes were fixed, rarely blinking, and she was staring intently at...nothing. “Daphne?” he asked. He thought about waving a hand in front of her face...then it hit him. He now

knew exactly why Arabella Zabini hadn't responded to his summons. Anger surged through him. "Release her at once, Stefano," he growled, drawing his wand with a flourish and aiming it at a seemingly innocent shadow to his right.

The Illusionist moved out of the concealing shadows, a look of amusement on his face. Stefano Zabini was a few inches shorter than him, and his tanned skin appeared much darker, as the only source of light in the room was the waning moon. "She is not harmed, Aiden," Zabini assured him. "I wanted to surprise you, old friend."

"Rest assured, you've been successful. But I don't think you much of a *friend* for using an Unforgivable on my daughter."

Zabini's face broke into an amused smile, and he held his palms out, in a gesture of innocence. "Please...you think so little of me? She is not under Imperius, Aiden. As I said, she is completely unharmed."

"Then what have you done to her?" Aiden demanded.

"Her mind is empty, Aiden, that is all. She is not capable of conscious thought. It is entirely temporary, and she'll be back to her cold and sarcastic self before I have left the property."

Aiden decided to take the man at his word. He didn't trust any Illusionist, much less one as slippery as Stefano Zabini, but the man was reputed to be an honorable gentleman, and he had little to gain by harming Daphne. "I'm going to assume you heard the overheard the entire meeting."

"Of course," Zabini said. "Would I miss such an important gathering?"

"It is tradition for one to be in plain sight during such a meeting, not hiding outside the door like some criminal," Aiden reminded him, his tone icy.

"I've never been much for tradition," Zabini said, shrugging. That wasn't strictly true, if Daphne's information about Blaise Zabini's training with a broadsword was to be believed. The Zabinis had always had a strange fascination with bladed weapons.

"If you have nothing of importance to say, Stefano, then you will release my daughter now."

"But I do have something important to say, my dear Aiden," Zabini said. He paused for a long moment. Just before Aiden was about to reply, he added in a conspiratorial whisper, "The Zabini family formally requests an alliance with your family. I have given Blaise authority to work out a similar deal with his friend. We're going to fight this time, Aiden. No more running. My family has been accused of cowardice in the past. I seek to put any such accusations to rest."

Aiden was pleased to hear the news, so pleased that he almost forgot about his spell-bound daughter...*almost*. His voice was strained and cold. "As patriarch of the Greengrass family, I accept your offer of alliance. We will exchange gifts at a later date. Now, let my daughter go, and get the hell off of my property, *or Merlin help me, I'll...*"

"Your message is received, Aiden. It was nice doing business with you." He snapped his fingers, and Daphne jerked violently, head spinning around, eyes desperately searching for her attacker, before they fell on her father. Aiden glanced at the spot where Stefano Zabini had been, and as he expected, he was no longer there.

"Father, what just happened to me?" Daphne demanded.

Despite his foul mood, Aiden chuckled. The world never ceased to amaze him.

The twenty-something witch tore into her dinner, violently snatching up large portions of piping-hot food and piling them greedily on her plate, wielding her silverware with all the intimidating brutality of a Viking berserker swinging a battle-axe. The others at the long, beaten table were reluctant to even reach for their share of the massive and mouth-wateringly appetizing feast prepared by Molly Weasley, for fear they might be wounded by the stabbing fork and butter knife. After a few wordless glances, Harry decided it was his responsibility to take action.

"Tonks, has your mother been starving you or something?"

The Metamorphmagus, who tonight sported short purple hair with long bangs and brown eyes, looked at him strangely. "Come again?"

"What Harry is trying to say is that you are eating like a starving man...woman," Hermione amended.

Tonks still didn't seem to get it. Actually, it occurred to Harry that it was quite possible she knew exactly what they were talking about, and was feigning ignorance for her own amusement. Indeed, knowing Tonks, that seemed to be the more plausible scenario. "Haven't started eating yet," she protested. She cut off a large piece of meat and stuck it in her mouth. "Half now," she corrected, chewing vigorously.

Ginny gave a long, exaggerated sigh. "Tonks, your table manners are barbaric. I've seen more dignity and class when Hagrid dumps the leftovers in the pig trough.

Tonks looked at her for a moment, then shrugged. "Food's getting cold." She closed her eyes for a moment, swallowing the food she'd been chewing. She gave a loud snort just as Harry realized that she'd acquired a pig's snout. After a brief moment of complete silence, Ginny went into a fit of hysterical laughter, Harry gave his own snort, and Hermione managed to look somewhat indignant before she looked down at the table, trying to hide an amused smile. Her requisite juvenile antics done, Tonks began eating like something resembling a human being, though she kept the nose. Ron and the twins, lacking familiarity with the antics of the young Auror, stared at Harry and the three girls in confusion. Ginny's face was still red as she began shoveling food onto her plate, her table manners indefinitely superior to those that her older friend had just put on display. Harry and Hermione dug in next, finally followed by the Twins and Ron, who was stockpiling enough food on his plate to feed a small African country.

The door to the kitchen opened, and several members of the Order filed in. Bill Weasley, Remus Lupin, Hestia Jones, and Kingsley Shacklebolt all joined them at the table. Daphne and Sirius were nowhere to be found. Remus noticed Harry's glance at the empty

doorway. "Sirius is talking a few things over with Dumbledore," he explained. "As for Daphne, I'm not sure where she is."

Harry nodded, and continued eating. Daphne had been absent quite a bit during their stay at Headquarters, and rarely offered explanations. Out of the corner of his vision, he saw Ginny's mother move to the kitchen sink, directly a ballet of pots, pans, sponges, and brushes with her wand. "Anything interesting happening out there?" he asked Remus.

The slight moment of hesitation that came before the werewolf's answer told Harry he wasn't being entirely honest. "Things are pretty quiet at the moment, actually. You-Know-Who is moving slowly, trying to escape the attention of the Ministry."

"Like *that's* hard to do," Ginny scoffed. That drew a glare from the redhead's mother, but Molly didn't say anything.

Harry decided that he'd be as brutally honest with Lupin as the man had been dishonest to him. "Got some rather exciting news recently. Aiden says I ought to expect an owl from Edwin and Gavin Burke in the next few days, containing a formal offer of alliance. Imagine that?" He took a large chunk out of a bread roll as the kitchen fell completely silent.

When no one spoke, he glanced up. Remus had a haunted look in his eyes. "*Harry...*"

"I know what I'm doing, Remus," Harry told him. "I know that they are both former Death Eaters that deserted from his ranks."

"And you still want them on your side?" Ron asked around a large quantity of food..

"Don't talk with your mouth full, Ronald," Hermione scolded. But she was also giving her best friend a wary look. Harry supposed he should have been grateful. She might have exploded at him in years past. Harry was trying to make a point. Daphne and Tonks were the only people that would tell him what was really happening, and because of Tonks' junior status and Daphe's frequent absences, Harry knew considerably less about what the Order was doing than

he liked. Molly Weasley had emphatically argued against Harry or anyone that was not of age knowing even the most insignificant details of the Order's meetings. It was stupid, it was infuriating, it was illogical, and, according to Ginny, it was nothing out of the ordinary for the Weasley matriarch.

"If Aiden says that I can at least rely on their support for now, that's good enough for me," Harry said, shrugging. "They were marked for death by Voldemort and escaped. I suppose it's possible they could be spies, but that might damage his reputation, one that he cares a great deal about. Besides, seeing as they've killed innocents before, I'm hardly planning to trust them with my life. I'll put them in a position where they can do the most damage to the enemy and the least damage to me."

"You'd trust a couple of Death Eaters even *that* far?" Bill asked, sounding skeptical. "If the bastards have killed innocents before, with little or no coercion involved, they can't exactly be the most decent fellows to begin with."

Molly Weasley, who looked like she might faint, did the only thing she could do.

"William! Language!"

Bill mumbled an apology, while Shacklebolt picked up the argument. A tall, muscled African wizard, with a reputation for fearlessness and wisdom, Kingsley had somehow managed to get both himself and Tonks (presumably with Scrimgeour's cooperation) onto Fudge's personal guard, although they were used far less frequently than Aurors Dawlish and McGlinchy, Fudge's most loyal bodyguards. Tonks didn't think all that much of either of them, making some particularly foul comments about McGlinchy's lack of intelligence and common sense. Shacklebolt was a veteran of the first war, in which he'd acquitted himself quite well, and a stalwart ally of Dumbledore. His voice, a deep bass reminiscent of Grigory Ivanov, only added to his commanding presence. At the moment, he wore dark purple robes and a golden hoop earring. "Weasley's right, Potter," he said. "I'm not sure how qualified you are to judge the reliability of a pair of cold-blooded killers. I know people that lost friends to their wands."

“With all due respect, Kingsley,” Harry said, using the man’s first name without hesitation, “I don’t think you really understand just how much I know about the First War, or the resources that I have access to.” Harry hadn’t just set Aiden’s letter aside when he received it and then sat on his thumbs. He’d immediately begun researching the two men in question, learning about their backgrounds, their crimes, their multiple escapes from Voldemort’s forces. Literally dozens of books had been written about the First War, though only a few had achieved mass publication, such as *The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts*, in Harry’s opinion, one of the most poorly written books he’d ever read, full of blatant inaccuracies and Ministry propaganda. It hadn’t been a pretty picture, but he was willing to consider an alliance. There could be no doubt that they knew there would have to be certain unsaid conditions to this agreement, and that Harry was probably willing to risk a lot less on their behalf than they were on his.

Shacklebolt looked taken aback by the hard edge in Harry’s voice. He’d been more than a little stunned by the way that most of the Order failed to understand that he was, in fact, not a child, that he knew more about the Dark Arts and those who wielded them than quite a few of the people in the Order, and that rather than pouting about his exclusion, Harry was quite content to find ways around the roadblocks. He hadn’t really intended to fire a warning shot across the Order’s bow, but wasn’t that exactly what he was doing? Wasn’t he telling them that they had better start treating him as an equal in experience rather than an inferior in years?

Surprisingly, it was the normally reserved Hestia Jones that defused the situation. “I think, Kingsley, that we might want to consider that Harry is a bit more educated in the ways of this war and the last one that we might have assumed. And that it might be in his best interests to know some of the things that we’re discussing.”

Harry stared at her, barely even trying to conceal his surprise. A dark-haired, pink-cheeked witch of average height, Jones worked in some mid-level capacity at the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. She didn’t see nearly as much action as the Aurors, but she had still acquitted herself well, and the former Ravenclaw had a shrewd sense of strategy. Her problem, Harry thought, was that she tended to try to forget the dire circumstances they were all in, approaching the real-

life problems of the Order as if they were purely theoretical, and real lives weren't on the line whenever they made a decision.

"Absolutely not," came Molly Weasley's heated reply. "He's just a *child!*" she hissed. Something inside Harry snapped. In one fluid motion, he rose, kicked the chair back with his right foot, and spun on the spot, blazing green eyes finding those of Ginny's mother.

"I am many things, Mrs. Weasley," Harry began, his voice deadly quiet. "I am a student at Hogwarts. I am a best friend of Tonks and Hermione. I am the ward of Daphne Dressler. I am the son of Lily and James Potter. I am your daughter's *boyfriend*. I am the Boy-Who-Lived, the infant that defeated the Dark Lord and saved the wizarding world before he was old enough to walk. I am a Slytherin. I am the most powerful student to walk the halls of Hogwarts since Tom Riddle himself. Despite my potential, I am relatively raw and untrained. I am a survivor. I am a compassionate individual when I want to be. I am cold and vicious when I don't. And I am a fifteen-year old male. But one thing that I am *not*...indeed, one thing that I have not been for some time, is a *child*. Or, as Fleur Delacour put it last year before she learned just how wrong she was, a *boy*. I have *seen* too much, *done* too much, and *suffered* far too much for that word to be applicable any longer." The air around them hummed with his magic as it strained against his barriers. Jars and pans began vibrating. Harry felt the power coursing through his veins, and he *loved* it.

Harry spun on the heel of his trainers, just as he'd seen Daphne do unconsciously for as long as he could remember, eyes flashing between Shacklebolt, Bill, Hestia, and Remus. "I'm tired of being left out, being excluded, when my inclusion is in the best interests of the Order. The more I know, the more likely I'll be to stay alive. The fact that all the pain I've felt in my life has been compacted into a mere fifteen years is entirely, indisputably *irrelevant*. And if you refuse to hear reason, then I can and will find others that will."

Others had now entered the room; as highly attuned to magic as he was at the moment, he could sense the familiar auras of Sirius Black, Arthur Weasley, Minerva McGonagall, Alastor Moody, Emmeline Vance, and Severus Snape. The latter broke the stunned silence as he quietly applauded Harry's outburst, and he was joined by Ginny,

Tonks, and after the shortest of pauses, Hermione. Even the twins joined in before the noise again died down. . Molly Weasley's husband had now reached her, and was trying to prevent her from continuing the argument.

Ginny's hand was on Harry's arm, squeezing gently. He took the hint and left the kitchen, followed by his friends, the twins, Hestia, and even more surprisingly, Ron. He felt Snape moving rapidly to join them, and gently pulled away from Ginny. "Just give us a minute," he told her. "Go to the library."

Ginny nodded and the others followed. Hestia, looking uncomfortable, chose to head upstairs. Harry turned to face his Head of House. "I suppose this is the part where you lecture me about the swelling dimensions of my skull."

The slightest flicker of amusement showed on the man's pasty white face. "No, Potter. Actually, I felt that you handled yourself quite well. A bit petulant, I suppose, but it's difficult for a fifteen-year old to say the things you just did without it sounding like whining."

"I'm sorry for having a difficult time accepting that the whole Order could have been told what's happened to me the last few years and *not* accepted Daphe's request on my behalf for full membership. I can keep secrets from my friends if that is what is required. I also sense that they are stonewalling Tonks to prevent my learning the information second-hand."

"Your intuition does not betray you. Indeed, I would say that the way the Order has handled this has been even more childish. They would rather dissolve the Order than bend the rules to allow the Boy-Who-Lived full membership two year before he comes of age. They are jealous of you, Potter. Jealous of the attention that Dumbledore pays you. There are quite a few of them that feel you are just an abnormally lucky spoiled brat with an inflated sense of self-importance."

"Then they are fools."

"They are fools," Snape agreed. "I've told you more than once, Potter, that when I have torn you down in the past...after I stopped living in it

myself, of course, that I was merely attempting to ensure that you understand the full ramifications of having a destiny such as yours. And I am satisfied that you do understand that you may be asked to sacrifice everything your hold dear, that you will have remain logical and rational in the face of great strife...to the extent that any wizard can in such trying circumstances. I am confident, Potter, that you are aware of your own weaknesses, and that you are working to address them. I am confident, also, that you are aware that your life is as fragile as anyone else's and that every additional second that you live is a blessing."

"That really does mean a lot, coming from you."

"I am not an easy man to please, Potter," Snape said. "Nor am I a fair man, or even a decent one. I am who I am. So, yes, that kind of compliment does not often fall from my lips." He paused. "You should know that the Headmaster is not to blame for this. He would not object to your joining the Order. He feels you are ready. Actually, Potter, I believe he seeks to train you as his replacement as leader. But he cannot show his true feelings, or it may break the Order apart. And that cannot be allowed to happen, or so Albus feels."

"Who's opposing me, then?"

"Alastor is probably the most vocal of them all, though that is to be expected. Molly Weasley, who deserved what you gave her, in case you were wondering, is a close second. Vance resists, as does Podmore. Dodge would follow the Headmaster off a cliff, so he is no obstacle. Black is one of your more vocal supporters, surprisingly. Dressler has already stated her case for your inclusion, not that anyone listened. The other Weasleys probably wouldn't fight it. The werewolf has said little, but he is clearly on your side." Snape smirked. "Although you probably didn't do yourself that much good by revealing your alliance with Aiden Greengrass and potential relationship with the Burke brothers. For most, it will only emphasize that you are an impulsive, ignorant brat that hasn't the slightest clue what he's doing."

"The Zabinis have also reached an agreement with me, although I'll have to wait until I see Blaise again before I can make that official," Harry revealed.

Snape looked conflicted. Harry knew he didn't like Blaise; really, *no one* he knew really like Blaise, although Ginny was warming to him. He'd made a bad first impression, and was being dogged by it even now, years after he'd made his initial mistakes. It was an important lesson to learn. First impressions aren't easily overcome. At the same time, the friendship between the sole heir to the Zabini family and the Boy-Who-Lived was genuine, as was the decision to fight on his side in the coming war. Snape probably knew that, too. "Be careful, Potter. Such an alliance is not necessarily unwise, but it is not something to be taken lightly. Arabella Zabini is dangerous, and her husband even more so, because he is so adept at escaping the eyes of others. How those two managed to create a boy so naïve and innocent as Mr. Zabini I will never understand."

"I think you underestimate him."

"I think you underestimate his capacity to appear more mature than he really is," Snape countered. "Zabini is Slytherin, after all, Potter. A model of my House he is not. But he is as capable of deception and manipulation. He is especially capable of self-deception."

"I believe that Blaise has moved past that somewhat, trying to focus more on being what he claims to be instead of trying to look the part. That's why I was willing to let him in."

"We'll see," Snape said curtly. "You are playing a dangerous game, Potter. One misstep could cost you dearly."

"And yet it is a game that I cannot afford *not* to play," Harry said, his voice soft, but firm. "I need the Dark purebloods, Professor. At the very least, I have to deny them to Voldemort. We're already outnumbered. I need the best fighters the wizarding world has to offer, and that is where to find them."

"Do not make the mistake of assuming they will ever view you as an equal, much less that they do now," Snape warned. "You are from an old Light family, Potter. You are, in terms of years, a *child*. The fact

that you believe your age to be entirely irrelevant, as you so bluntly put it, does not matter to them.”

“What if I were to declare for the Dark?” Harry asked.

The question seemed to have caught his Head of House off-guard, although he recovered quickly enough. “*That* would be an error of monumental proportions, Potter. First, it is not customary for any witch or wizard to choose his or her orientation before they come of age. Second, you would lose the respect of the entire Light community, before you had a chance to speak to them on an even footing. And Third, you are not yet ready to make such a choice.”

Harry studied the Potions Master for a long moment. “It was a purely hypothetical question, although you certainly made your views known. In case you are concerned, I should tell you that I’m well aware that making such a decision at the present time would be both rash and unwise.”

“I am glad to hear it.”

They stood in that darkened corridor of Black Manor for several moments, neither of them speaking. Finally, Harry decided to risk it. “I don’t suppose you might be able to tell me the things that the Order has decided my innocent ears are not fit to hear.”

“I don’t see why I shouldn’t,” Snape replied. “The reality, Potter, is that the Order has done very little over this summer. Our primary accomplishment has been actually reforming it, as well as adding a few new members. A few of us have been sent on scouting missions, using the path that your guardian established during her absence after the Yule Ball. She wasn’t just gathering information; she was also re-establishing contact with old friends and sympathizers. There are not many to be found. The Dark Lord has been recruiting heavily, and meeting with alarming success. Camps have been established, training the newest generation of Death Eaters. We have heard rumors they intend to seize Durmstrang, with the blessing of a number of powerful families, although we don’t expect so bold a move in the near future. Most disheartening has been the utter failure of our efforts to rally Light wizards on the continent. They are convinced that it is none of their concern, and lack the ideological and

historical motivation of their Dark counterparts. We may well be on our own, Potter.”

“Any possibility of getting help from our friends across the pond?” Harry ventured.

“The Americans?” Snape asked, sounding baffled by the question. “Unless things have greatly changed, help will not come until it is far too late. You know, of course, of the differences between their system and ours? Their wizarding society co-exists within their Muggle society and government. It is an ugly arrangement, but somehow it has worked. But the problem is that they can do little to intervene on the behalf of others beyond their own borders. They lack any matter of centralization of wizarding authority. There are laws, there are local leaders, and the wizards and witches that are members of the United States government are the de-facto heads of the magical community, but they can offer little assistance.”

“That’s about what I expected you to say,” Harry said grimly. “Things really aren’t looking good right now, are they?”

“No, Potter. This is about as bad as I’ve ever seen it. At least during the Dark Lord’s Reign of Terror, there was resistance, and opposition. There is no urgency, and our Minister is a cowardly traitor. Not in the literal sense, of course.”

“Of course.” No, Fudge was no agent of Voldemort. But he was a traitor nonetheless, in that he was acting against the best interests of the people that had voted him into office.

Something suddenly occurred to him. “Professor, has Dumbledore found a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher yet?”

Snape’s face remained impassive, although something flashed behind his dark eyes. “He has. You’ve met before.”

Oh, if Harry was right, that was the greatest understatement in human history. “It’s Daphne, isn’t it? Dumbledore’s asked her the last two years, and she said no.”

“You should discuss this with your guardian,” Snape advised, in a tone that meant he wasn’t letting this conversation go any further. “I’m afraid that as lovely as this little chat has been, I am a very busy man. Be careful, Potter. Things are not always as they seem.”

“Sir, if I haven’t learned that lesson yet, you might as well just give up on me.”

Snape gave him a very rare smile, spun, and strode off down the hallway.

Harry stared down at the letter in his hands, a part of him still not entirely confident that the words were genuinely those of Gavin and Edwin Burke. The more rational part of him knew what they were, and was currently running through dozens of scenarios regarding their potential usefulness, as well as the risk they might pose to his own life and the lives of those he cared for if they turned out to be traitors.

In front of him, lying innocently on the table, just to compound his confusion, was what appeared to be a wand, made of a polished dark wood. It wasn’t. In fact, what appeared to be a potential weapon was in reality something far more deadly. If one were to pull on the ends of the shaft, it would come apart, revealing a long, slender blade laced with poison, poison that was imbued in the steel itself. It was a tool of an assassin, perhaps even a warning. It didn’t make the slightest bit of sense. If the Burkes were concerned that he might turn down their offer because he felt he couldn’t trust them, why in Merlin’s name would they seek to make him less comfortable about their intentions? Did they seek to see how far Harry’s trust went? Was this their idea of a joke? Was the alliance dependent on how far Harry was willing to trust them?

Harry carefully set down the letter and picked up the fake wand. Gently, he pulled on the ends, and the sheath slid off the lethal weapon. The blade was so thin that it looked like it might break with any kind of force, but Harry knew that it was made with Goblin steel, and Goblin steel did not break.

What are you trying to tell me, boys? What is the point of this?

It was a dagger, in a sense, he supposed, although they'd clearly taken liberties in observing that pureblood tradition. The daggers that were often exchanged were bedecked with jewels and rare metals, meant more for ceremonial display than actual use. Aiden's dagger was a bit more durable than that, and the charm that would protect his own flesh from harm seemed to serve as evidence that Harry might be able to use it as a legitimate secondary weapon. But *this*?

There is nothing to display. It is a practical tool.

It also brought up the question of what Harry might send them in return. Daphne had helped him compile a list of certain heirlooms in the Potter and Dressler vaults that could be considered valuable enough to be respected yet expendable enough that they would be missed. Harry had never actually told her that he'd chosen something that wasn't even on the list. He had wanted to make sure that Aiden understood the level of trust between them. In the end, he thought, his gift said far more than he could hope to put into words.

Harry didn't know, however, how Daphne would react to this latest development.

Harry gently re-sheathed the assassin's blade, and set it down on the table in front of him. He picked up the letter. The words that the two brothers had chosen to use did little to calm his worries about their trustworthiness.

To the esteemed and magnificent Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived,

We are writing to you, Mr. Potter, because of a number of arguments made by one of your allies, concerning the reasons that it might be to our advantage to join your crusade against the Dark Lord. We are no friends of his; though we once swore loyalty and took his Mark with pride and contentment, in his service we were thoroughly disillusioned. It was not the things we did to those of less noble blood, certainly not the horrors committed against those of no magical blood that would break our loyalties to him. No, it was the actions that we took against our own brothers, for the sole reason that they did not see eye-to-eye with us. If a Dark family of the most noble bloodlines to be found in Britain refused the Dark Lord, we were sent as the angels of his vengeance. This sort of work disgusted us. We believed

that any man so intent on controlling others that the price of wanting to remain neutral was death was no man fit to rule the wizarding world, no matter what advances to our kind that he promised.

We suppose it might be wise to introduce ourselves. We hail from the Great and Noble Family Burke, and trace our Dark lineage back to the time that magical nobles forced the Magna Carta on that foolish Muggle King. Our birth names are Edwin and Gavin, each of us named for a separate paternal relative of the distant past. We have composed this letter together, although for practical reasons, only one of us is actually putting quill to parchment. His identity need not concern you. On this matter, we speak as one. We are both graduates of Durmstrang Academy. We were both able to escape Ministry attention after the war, and settled into a peaceful existence in Northern Britain. Events have now transpired that have put our lives and those of our family in mortal peril. The Dark Lord that we walked away from so many years ago has returned, and we do not like our chances of survival if we continue to walk the solitary path. One of us has a wife and two children to protect, while the other has only himself. Rest assured, it will make little difference in our degree of loyalty to your cause.

We understand that you may not trust us. After all, we were once willing servants of the man we now want to help you destroy. We have a reputation, of sorts, of being cold-blooded killers with no allegiance but to themselves. Our family's name has traditionally been one associated with conspiracies and political intrigue. Indeed, it might be wise for you not to trust us completely, and we tell you this only out of concern for your well-being. Certain traits tend to run in bloodlines. It is unfortunate, but we cannot deny that deceit and betrayal have been a part of our family's history for as long as it has been recorded.

But let us not leave you with the impression that we are little more than a danger to you, Mr. Potter. We are both capable fighters, and the rest of our family has received combat training. We have been lauded as dueling champions during our schooldays, and the latest generation of Burkes has upheld the family mantle. If you ask us to kill someone, rest assured that they will not be long for this earth. We

are not cold-blooded murderers, Mr. Potter. We hold ourselves to certain standards.

We propose an alliance between our clan and that historical bastion of Light, the Esteemed and Most Virtuous Family Potter. If you call our names, we will be there, and we will fight; we cannot afford to do anything else. You can trust, Mr. Potter, that we will keep our promises. We merely warn you that we seldom put ourselves in a situation that does not allow us to improvise if the need arises.

We will give you whatever time you need to decide on a course of action. As a token of our honesty, we have enclosed a gift, a rare and remarkable magical artifact that has been in our family for centuries. It is yours now. Use it wisely. Keep in mind who gave it to you.

We await your owl.

Edwin Mordred Burke

Gavin Lucifer Burke

Harry couldn't help but crack a strained smile as he read the names of the two former Death Eaters. The choice of middle names was as curious as it was disturbing. Harry knew enough about Muggle legends and literature to recognize both references. *Mordred, the man who betrayed King Arthur, and Lucifer, an Angel that betrayed God himself. Both traitors from Muggle legends. Is their father's middle name Judas?*

Gavin probably saved that one for his son. And if his daughter's middle name isn't Delilah...and they expect me to trust them?

That was just it. They *did* expect Harry to trust them, and against all of his better judgment, it was happening. Somehow, their brutal honesty, which ought to have made him feel revolted and disgusted, made the possibility of an alliance with them all the more appealing. There was no denying that they were dangerous weapons. *The question, of course, is to whom?*

He needed guidance. He needed the opinion of a person he trusted, a person that understood the realities of his situation, and would not

immediately distrust the men because they were Death Eaters. He needed someone with experience dealing with the Darker sides of pureblood culture, someone with enough experience to gauge the brothers' intentions.

He needed the only person in the world that really understood his position, as a nexus between the Darkness and the Light.

He needed Daphne.

Chapter 4: The Greatest Enemy

Sparks flew as the Striking Curse crashed into a translucent blue barrier. The wand that cast the defensive spell was abruptly yanked back, slicing through the air in two quick slashes, sending a pair of Cutting Curses lancing back in the direction of the origin of the hostile spell-fire. They vanished into the target's jade-green Servos Shield, and that magic was funneled back into the young woman's wand, before it was expended in the form of a vicious, but poorly-aimed Bludgeoning Curse, which her partner easily avoided with a quick duck. They traded Stunning Spells, Striking Curses, Disarming Spells, and Full-Body Binds, each displaying their defensive prowess as neither combatant allowed a single hex to get through...until the young woman caught him with a Stinging Hex on the left hand. Growling, he retaliated almost instantly, forcing her to deal with three different hexes. Two of them were absorbed by her shield, but the third, a Striking Curse, expended very little of its energy in breaking through the weakened barrier, hitting the witch in the gut and knocking her back several steps. Sensing weakness, the young man got off a Stunner and his own Bludgeoning Curse before the woman could regain her balance. The red jet of the Stunning Spell whizzed past her right ear, but the Bludgeoning Curse, just two seconds behind, headed directly for her midsection.

Nymphadora Tonks spun around to avoid her opponent's hex, which grazed her back before it struck the wall behind her with tremendous force. She let her momentum complete the turn, trailing her wand arm behind her, momentarily hiding it from view. She whipped her wand arm around, casting a Bludgeoning Curse the instant she had a clear shot. Confused and momentarily frozen by the unfamiliar motion of her wand, the curse was on Harry before he could react, and his half-formed shield absorbed little of the physical blow, spinning him around and knocking him back. He managed to hold on to his wand, but he was vulnerable, and the young Auror took advantage. A Flinging Hex lifted him off his feet and slammed him into the wall. He hit hard, bouncing off and crashing to the ground, dazed, but undeterred. Technically, he was done for, and that most certainly would have been the case in a real duel, but Harry was too stubborn to give in that easily. Clenching his teeth, he pulled himself to his feet,

dropping into a dueling pose despite his painful bruises. Tonks, her arms crossed over her chest, smiled in amusement, although her eyes betrayed concern. "You don't know when to give up, do you?" she asked. "You really want to do this again?"

"You're making it sound as if you routinely trounce me, and I just keep refusing to accept defeat," Harry replied. "I've sent you arse-over-tea-kettle more than once, you know."

"Believe me, the bruises didn't do much for my looks," Tonks replied sourly. "We've been at this for hours, and that looked like it hurt. Let's call it a day, alright?" Tonks tried to use her 'sad puppy' look, but Harry wasn't having it.

"One more," he argued. "One more and then we'll take a break."

"A break? As in, after the aforementioned break we'll be at this again?"

"If you're wiped out, then I can always just practice alone, or find somebody else to duel with," Harry said, flashing her an infuriating grin. *What makes Tonks tick? 1) Food. 2) Competition.*

"You're on," she replied, her eyes narrowed. "Maybe I ought to stop going easy on you."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "You're fully aware that I've cut my repertoire in half, right? And that I'm using the lesser half, because I don't want you to get hurt?"

"And I'm holding back a little too," Tonks insisted. "Don't want Daphne on my case."

"Somehow, I don't think she'd mind it if you challenged me."

"Well I don't want to cause you *unnecessary* pain. This is just practice, of course."

"Of course."

Tonks wiped her brow. "Alright, I'll break out a few new things I've picked up this year, see how you deal with them. Why don't you try to use your Servos Shield more often?"

"Because it's still a work in progress," Harry said. "My offensive spell casting is much more advanced than my defensive skills. That said, I'm a lot better."

"I've noticed...well, up until that last one. Thought I'd show you something new. S'called the Sidewinder, or something like that. Auror instructor named Sykes taught it to us. Real tough to master; that's probably the best one I've managed so far," Tonks admitted. "Dead useful, though. When you get really into a duel, something as simple as changing the path of your arm can make a big difference."

"I didn't recognize what was happening at first," Harry admitted. "By the time I realized, I didn't have time to react."

"You could have just dodged, you know."

"Nope. I was frozen. Can't let that happen," he growled, more to himself than to Tonks. He was getting better. But translating his tremendous magical tools into skills was proving to be very difficult, and Daphne wasn't all that surprised. Dumbledore had needed decades of training before he'd finally put it all together. Riddle had managed it in far less time, though that time had still been measured in decades. For once, Harry wanted his path to be more like that of the future Dark Lord.

"You're too hard on yourself, y'know?" Tonks said in a soft voice. "I know that you've got a big destiny and all, but you've just turned fifteen, and you've had just two years of constantly-interrupted training, and you've been dealing with a lot of stuff during that time. You're a damn good duelist, Harry. Add in your ability to just overpower people, and-"

"It's not *enough!*" he snapped. "I was *helpless*, Tonks. I didn't stand a *chance* against the bastard. He *could* have killed me, but he decided to play with his food first before eating it." He turned around, trying to hide his face. He was crying. Again.

"Harry," Tonks said softly. "There aren't many wizards who could have done much better. The thought of facing You-Know-Know scares the you-know-what out of me."

"It should," Harry said still facing the wall. "He's just...he's *unbelievably* powerful, Tonks. And he's master of psychological warfare. He can just break you down, destroy your spirit, your very will to live. He managed to suppress my magic, made me as useless as a Muggle. And then even after he lifted that, and gave *me* a chance to fight...it was pathetic, Tonks. I was *pathetic*. I don't even understand how I survived. Fate smiled on me again, I guess."

"I've always been of the opinion that lucky was better than good," Tonks said. Her smile vanished. "Look, Harry, we're all human..."

"Not so sure about *him*."

"He's human in what *counts*, Harry," Tonks plowed on, a hint of irritation in her voice. "He can die, and he makes mistakes. Nobody's perfect, Harry. You're still here. Learn from the mistakes you make, do what you can to address your weaknesses, and hope for the best. That's all you can do, kiddo."

"You don't understand..."

"Don't understand *what*, Harry? Y'know, I'd be rather offended if you *actually* thought I didn't understand that you have a tremendous part to play in this war. You really thought I was so *stupid* and blind to not recognize that in all likelihood it's gonna be you on one side, him on the other, and that it's all gonna be about who walks away?" Tonks demanded, her accusing eyes locked on Harry's back. "Turn around, kid," she snapped. "Listen to me."

Harry did, trying to gather his composure. He didn't want to be dealing with all of this right now. He hadn't told Ginny or Hermione about it, because he knew that as much as they *wanted* to help him, as much as they *wanted* him to tell them what was bothering him, he knew they *couldn't* do much to help him. Harry had learned that practice had its limits, and he wouldn't be able to stop doubting himself until he could prove he was up to the task set before him. A

task he didn't entirely understand, given that the exact words of the Prophecy remained unavailable to him, though, that hardly mattered. This war would be fought by many, but ultimately, the outcome would be decided by which of Harry or Voldemort survived their last confrontation. "Go on, Tonks."

The former Ravenclaw pressed her lips together. "Harry, you can't win this if you are fighting yourself the whole way."

"Do you realize how many times I've escaped death in my lifetime?" Harry asked her. "I've lost count. And I'm not naïve enough to believe that it means I live a charmed life or any rubbish like that. I'm just cynical enough to believe that I might be just about out of chances."

"Keep thinking like that, see where it gets you," Tonks spat at him. "Merlin, you're making *me* depressed. Y'know how tough that is? I've heard more positive reinforcement in Snape's Potions class. Can't you just stop *thinking* for a moment? You aren't in the middle of a battle right now, Harry. You're *safe* here, as long as you stop looking for trouble. Enjoy it while you can."

"All the while Voldemort keeps gathering his forces, getting stronger and stronger," Harry retorted. "'Course I don't even know if that's *true* since those bloody idiots won't let me sit in on the Order meetings. Fools even have the nerve to exclude you, just out of spite."

"It's more complicated than that."

"So they tell you."

"So they tell me," Tonks admitted. She grunted, a hard look on her face. "Come over here."

"Tonks, what..."

"Shut your yapping and get over here!" she screamed at him. Baffled, he slowly approached. As soon as he was close enough, she lunged at him, capturing him in a ridiculously tight embrace, practically squeezing the life out of him. Tonks rested her head on his shoulder. "I love you, Harry. You're my little brother, don't ever forget that. And

I'm not gonna stand here listen to you talk about how you're doomed to failure before you even try. I'm not gonna let you do that, Harry."

She released him, but Harry was just able to suck in a breath of life-giving oxygen before she grabbed him by the shoulders, holding him fast, her dark eyes boring into his with an intensity that he'd never seen before. He tried to speak but she silenced him with a look. "No, you listen to *me*, Harry James Potter. I've been alone for a lot of my life. Always been a bit of a social drifter, and Mum's had to work hard all these years 'cause Dad wasn't up to it all. And I am *not* gonna lose you. You look into my eyes, and tell me that you are gonna survive this. That you are gonna wipe that bastard's stain from this Earth once and for all. *Promise me, Harry! Promise me* that you aren't gonna *ever* give up, that you are going to keep fighting, that you are gonna win out in the end because you bloody *want* it more!"

"Tonks, I can't..."

"I don't want to hear about what you *can't* do," Tonks hissed. "I want to hear you say that you *believe* you are going to win this war, and that you are going to be there to help us pick up the pieces when it's all over. I want to hear you say that, Harry. And I don't want to *ever* hear you say anything to contrary again. *Ever!*"

Harry met her eyes, the fire within him re-kindled. "I'll be there, Tonks," he growled, his magic swirling around them, shaking dust loose from the rafters. "I'm going to win this thing. I'm going to make that bastard *fuckin*g pay for all the lives he's ruined, for all the pain and suffering he's caused, for everything he's put *me* through. I won't rest until he's dead!" His cry rang in the silence.

Tonks stared at him for a long moment. She let him go, crossing her arms and shivering slightly. "Thank you," she finally said. "I needed to hear that. And so did you. You meant what you just said, didn't you? I mean, there's always the possibility that you might...you know...but..."

"I meant every word," Harry said, as stunned as she was. "That's really how I feel. I *hate* him, Tonks."

"Then take care of yourself, kid, so that when the time comes, you'll be there to finish the job you started fourteen years ago," Tonks told him. "And rest assured that I'll do everything in my power to help you. But you can't force it, Harry. You've got to let it come. You might feel useless, but if you really want to kill that bugger, you've got to let it come." Tonks' voice and face had softened considerably. "You're afraid of failure, Harry. It's easy to figure that out, just dueling you. That's okay. Everyone is afraid that they might not meet expectations, that they might watch their dreams blow up in their faces. That doesn't make you any different from anyone else."

"That's not all," Harry admitted. He immediately regretted it.

"Tell me." Tonks' tone left no room for argument.

"I don't want to fight him, to learn the Dark Arts with the intention of destroying him, only to *become* him."

"Oh, bugger, Harry you could never..."

"*Bullshit*," Harry spat. "Don't you dare tell me that I'm too good of a person to fall. Because you know, deep in your heart, that I have it in me. You've seen glimpses of it before. The lust for power. The cruelty. The desire for vengeance against my enemies. It's within all of us, Tonks, but it's worse for me. Dumbledore told me something when I last saw him, and he couldn't have been more right. He told me that his warnings about using the Dark Arts were out of a concern that I might fall as Riddle fell, because if that happens, then the price will be paid by others. My friends, my allies, the innocent..." Harry trailed off. "Tonks, Dark Lords are dangerous. Most of them have become murderous despots, sought to control the wizarding world and everyone and everything in it."

"*Most*, not *all*," Tonks protested.

"So maybe there were two or three minor exceptions," Harry said. "If I continue down this path, given the amount of power that I have, I'm going to become a Dark Lord. And war changes people, Tonks. It brings out a part of them they never knew they had. I'm already terrified of what I might become, and the thought that I haven't even seen the worst..."

Tonks' embrace was gentler this time, but no less firm. "You'll be okay, Harry. You have to do what you've gotta do. If you are skilled at the Dark Arts, then you've gotta learn them. You're different from Voldemort, anyway."

Harry pulled himself away. "*How?* Because I have the capacity to love, to care? Riddle was born with that too, Tonks. It's a part of every human being. It doesn't mean you can't lose it."

"*Fuck* your capacity!" Tonks cursed. "You *do* love. And you've got a small army of people that aren't going to let you fall like he did. Hermione, Ginny, Daphne, Remus, Sirius, Dumbledore, Blaise, Neville, Luna, Aiden, the twins, and I are going to all be there for you. If you slip, we'll catch you. You can bloody well count on it!"

Harry grinned despite himself. "Guess I'm stuck with you for the duration, then."

"Wouldn't have it any other way, you stupid prat. Now come on. We're done here."

Much to Harry's dismay, it hadn't ended there. Tonks had refused to allow Ginny and Hermione to remain ignorant of Harry's fears and doubts. As she had so accurately pointed out, she wouldn't always be there when he need a firm kick in the arse. So he'd gotten his two friends together, and he'd told them. He'd ended up talking about the graveyard again in great detail, using some of the knowledge he'd since gained from Dumbledore. It hadn't been easy. The memories were still painfully fresh in his mind, even though his arm was nearly fully healed...well, almost.

It might have been fully functional, but it didn't look like that. Harry's magic and Snape's healing potions had done a remarkable job of repairing ruined bones, tendons, and ligaments, restoring his shredded limb to an extent few had thought possible. He was perfectly capable of spell-casting, writing, riding a broom...essentially everything, with his right hand. One thing he might have trouble doing was ever letting his right arm see the light of day. The healed flesh was crisscrossed with dozens of scars, so many that they molded together into larger and more noticeable disfigurements at some

points. It was nothing short of gruesome, and there was very little to be done about it. The scars were permanent, a reflection of the Dark magic that had created them, and when they tried a Glamour Charm, the magic wore off impossibly fast, lasting about a total of fifteen minutes. He'd taken to wearing long-sleeve shirts even in the hottest days of August. His hand also had some scarring, include a hatch pattern on the back of his hand, and his fingers occasionally stiffened up, but he had vastly exceeded expectations given his original prognosis.

Daphne had finally gotten back from wherever it was she kept disappearing to. Much to his chagrin, she neither offered an explanation, nor told him what she'd been up to. Harry had seen this before. Whatever Daphne was going through, it was intensely private, probably concerned her past, and therefore, was none of his business. Daphne didn't have any obligation to tell him about what she was going through, and he wasn't sure he really wanted to know. As much as he cared for her, during the few times she had opened up, he'd ended up feeling rather useless. He'd checked dates, to see if her odd behavior coincided with the anniversary of something, and probably found his answer. Today, August 22nd, was the anniversary of Edmond Dressler's death. Exactly a week previous was his and Daphne's wedding anniversary.

Regardless of her lack of disclosure, he had managed to hold a long and serious conversation concerning the Burkes' offer of alliance, as well as explaining the things that Dumbledore had told him about his magic. Daphne had mostly listened, offering only occasional advice or asking for clarification, but she'd waited until he was finished speaking before she'd given her opinion. It wasn't exactly what he'd expected. Daphne had in the past shown a virulent hatred towards former Death Eaters, from Lucius Malfoy, to Snape, to Karkaroff. She'd told him that, given the spot he was in, he'd best accept their offer, and while he could never allow himself to fully trust them, she thought the odds were pretty good that they'd fight for him when all was said and done. She recommended postponing any face-to-face meetings for the immediate future. *Establish the connection, and see what comes of it*, she'd said. *You aren't in a position to force things, Harry. You've got to wait and watch, see how things develop, and act accordingly.*

Harry was having a lot of trouble reconciling his own inaction with Voldemort's growing strength. Yet he'd still come to the realization that they were all right, and that he couldn't try to make things happen, because he'd be doomed to failure. He wasn't in the right position, he couldn't afford to make mistakes, and he would need to use every ounce of his Slytherin patience and cunning in order to shape things to his advantage. Acting impulsively because he was desperate to prove his own worth was suicidal, given the circumstances. Even Sirius had expressed the opinion (through Remus, as Harry and his Godfather were hardly on good terms at the moment) that Harry needed to take things slower. He had his 5th year at Hogwarts ahead of him, and, even if he felt differently, his OWLs were still extremely important. As much as he might want to forsake his studies in favor of training, he just wasn't in a position to do that, though he made it a point to get in an hour or two everyday, building his strength. Ginny had hammered it home even better than Tonks.

You aren't just some machine or mindless creature with no purpose in life other than fighting a war. Yes, it's important. No, it can't be the only thing on your mind. There is a life beyond the war, Harry. You can't forget that. Your humanity is a part of what makes you...you, I guess. I don't want you to lose that, and deep down, neither do you.

As strange as it was, it was at these times that Harry was grateful that he was surrounded by strong, intelligent women that knew him better than he knew himself.

Harry sometimes resented his friends for forcing him to share things he'd rather keep private. A part of him knew that some of those things weren't healthy to keep bottled up inside, but another part of him hated showing weakness, and as screwed up as it was, Harry tended to equate showing emotion with showing weakness. It was something he'd absorbed from Slytherin House, where the ideal was an ambitious person that betrayed nothing in public, while reading the emotions of others and manipulating them to his advantage. In reality, few really matched that ideal. Daphne Greengrass might have been the living embodiment of it, but she was the exception, not the rule. Harry's class was unusual in that it was filled with *properly*-raised pureblood heirs and heiresses. There was a dramatic difference in the behavior of the Slytherin Class of 1997 as compared to the

Slytherin Class of 1998. Namely, the latter actually acted their age. It was unnerving how mature and collected Greengrass, Nott, Bulstrode, Moon, Malfoy (at times), Parkinson (most of the time) were for their age. He supposed that he might include himself in the group, although Crabbe and Goyle didn't think enough to qualify and Davis and Blaise were most certainly *not* part of it. It was one of the reasons he liked the Zabini boy, and why others didn't trust him. Tracey, the only non-pureblood in the entire class, acted the part of a half-blood athlete; namely, she behaved like a slightly more manipulative and composed average female in her mid-teens: driven, an average student, and a tad banal.

No, we hardly represent a cross-section of teenagers in wizarding Britain.

Harry pushed those thoughts to the back of his mind. He stood alone in the makeshift training room in the basement of Number 12 Grimmauld Place. In front of him were dozens of clay figures lined up in formation. They'd found them in a locked storage closet, and it looked like they'd been used before, based on the wear and tear. Eventually, *Reparo* wasn't enough to completely restore an object that had been smashed more than once.

Now that he wasn't fighting any friends, he could let go. He hadn't really tested his full abilities in months. Tonks' pep talk had helped, but he needed to see it for himself. He needed to see the power in action. He needed tangible results.

Harry drew his wand, set himself, and attacked.

Dark magic crackled through the air, as Harry barked out incantations for Slicing Curses, Severing Curses, Demolition Curses, Bludgeoning Hexes, Bone-Breaking Hexes, and Compression Curses. His spells tore into the targets, blasting them apart, pulverizing clay into dust, creating a growing cloud of drifting particles as the massacre continued. His voice hoarse from screaming, Harry lowered his wand. One target, arms and head already blown apart, scarred from multiple hits from his Slicing Curses, defiantly stood on the left side of the decimated formation.

Harry drew back his wand, gathered his magic, and cast, twisting his wrist in a half circle, screaming the incantation for a Demolition Curse in his mind.

The lone target was annihilated, as Harry's silent spell-casting proved as devastating as he could have hoped. Standing there, covered from head-to-toe in gray dust, Harry grinned. He'd just done something quite remarkable. He heard applause, and for an instant, wondered if maybe his ego was getting a bit out of control after all. Then he realized it was coming behind him. He turned slowly, to see Kingsley Shacklebolt standing there, slowly clapping his hands. "Very impressive, Mr. Potter," he said in his deep, commanding voice. "That's the kind of barrage that could take down just about anyone. I'd heard you've struggled with silent spell-casting. I certainly couldn't have figured that from your last curse."

"I'm getting better," Harry admitted. "I think I've got the hang of it. First time I managed anything nearly that powerful, though."

"It's about progress, Mr. Potter, and you are making progress."

Harry cocked his head to the side. "Any particular reason you're down here?"

"I thought I might get in a little practice of my own, actually," Kingsley said.

"Want to duel me?" Harry offered.

Kingsley smiled. "I'd be delighted." He waved his wand, and the piles of rubble and dust vanished. "Oh, and Potter?"

Harry had just reached his end of the make-shift dueling circle. "Yeah?"

"Don't hold back. I talked to Nymphadora, and it seems I haven't yet seen the fullest extent of your abilities. My specialty is defensive magic, Potter."

"Sir, I don't mean to be disrespectful, but based on your assessment of what I did to those targets..."

"They weren't fighting back, were they?" Shacklebolt pointed out. "Wandless, silent, or otherwise, it takes time to use spells, Potter. You can only get off so many without leaving yourself vulnerable to a counter-strike."

"Best I've managed is three."

"I've seen Moody manage five," Kingsley said. "In his youth, of course, and his last two spells weren't as strong as the first three. That you can already manage three is quite remarkable for a wizard of your age. This will be a bit of a test for you, Potter. Use your offensive spells, but I want to see how well you defend. I'm going to try a mixture of silent spells and spells with vocal incantations. Look at the wand, not the face, Potter. If the wand is moving, you need to be ready."

Harry nodded.

They began. It didn't take long for Harry to realize that Kingsley's reputation was earned. The man was nimble on his feet, and conjured nearly impenetrable shields, holding them for longer than Harry thought possible. His arsenal was strictly composed of Light or neutral spells, but his style of dueling involved movement and deception. He got off a few powerful curses, but Harry dodged them, and was able to consistently block his other efforts. It was grueling, and Harry was forced to keep moving, unable to plant his feet and launch a prolonged assault. Shacklebolt would move around, forcing Harry to counter his footwork to keep them directly across from each other, and prevent one of them from gaining the upper edge. Both of them were covered in small cuts and bruises from near-misses, grazes, and half-deflected curses.

On they went. As tired as Harry was, Shacklebolt was sweating heavily, and his shields were losing strength as the battle wore on. Harry was completely locked in, fighting the best duel of his life, deflecting a volley of silent Striking Curses with remarkable ease. He began advancing, even as he forced Kingsley to stop a barrage of powerful Dark curses, including a Compression Curse, which buckled the man's red Guardian Shield, blowing sparks through the gaps.

He kept moving forward, shrinking the distance between them, keeping Kingsley so busy defending that he couldn't get off a single counter-strike. When he was close enough, he lunged, tackling the larger man and driving him back into the wall. Harry tried to pin the man's right hand, but Kingsley swung his wand up toward Harry's face, now inches from his own, and opened his mouth to incant a hex. Harry calmly shook his head. "Wouldn't do that if I were you." He traced his eyes down the man's torso, and Kingsley followed his gaze...to the razor-sharp, jewel-encrusted dagger in Harry's left hand, poised centimeters away from the Auror's gut. Harry flashed him a feral smile. "You're *dead*, Kingsley."

Harry backed away, staring hard at his opponent, trying to keep the elation he felt off of his face. Kingsley stared at him in bewilderment, and then started laughing, his deep bass echoing around the room. "Absolutely *brilliant*, Potter! Where'd you get that?"

"Gift from Aiden Greengrass. Said it'd come in handy in a duel. Guess he was right."

Shacklebolt nodded, although his expression was wary. "I've faced Aiden Greengrass before, Potter. The man knows every Dark Curse that exists, including a few he invented. His technique is almost exclusively offensive, and most of the time, he overwhelms his opponents before they get a spell off. When forced to fight a prolonged duel, you can beat him. But I certainly respect the man's knowledge. Most enemies won't expect you to be carrying a second weapon. I couldn't figure out what you were trying to accomplish."

"That was the general idea," Harry admitted.

"You see what you can do when you believe in yourself, Potter?" Kingsley asked. "You've got a long way to go, but I've never seen anything like that from any man twice your age. I've seen one woman fight a duel like that, the one who brought you up, against Alastor. It was her final test before she was promoted to Auror Commander. Moody had both legs back then, and she fought a hell of a duel. Looked like she might go down a few times, but she'd recover and just go right back on the offensive. She beat him, finally. And I don't think I've ever seen Alastor look that pleased. That was the start of

her legend. Auror students aren't supposed to best their teachers, just hold their own for five minutes. It took Daphne about thirty, but she beat him." Kingsley laughed. "Had to feel sorry for the next guy. He got leveled in about a minute and thirty seconds, once Moody had healed up."

Harry felt a pang of sympathy for that unfortunate fellow. "Who was it?"

Kingsley smiled, spreading his arms. "You're looking at him."

Harry couldn't stop the grin that split his face. "Daphne didn't let you forget that one, did she?"

"I thought I'd never hear the end of it," he admitted. "And I'm five years older than her. She was an unranked Auror for less than a week. She insisted upon being a leader, and she wanted the rank of commander. I was a five-year veteran. I did better the next time, though."

"Moody won," Harry guessed.

Kingsley shrugging. "Eh, that doesn't matter. It took him ten minutes, and I was proud of it."

Harry gave him a piercing look. "You don't seem overly concerned that I'm using the Dark Arts. Why?"

"Because Dumbledore trusts you, Potter. And honestly, even though I'd never use the Dark Arts as a matter of principle, I don't think that all Dark Wizards are Death Eaters. I knew Aiden at Hogwarts. He's a good man, Potter. He's got a temper, and he's ruthless when he wants to be. But he's a man that you can trust."

"You seem to have had a bit of an attitude adjustment since the last time I saw you."

"I underestimated you, Potter. You aren't all-powerful, but you aren't a child, and I didn't understand that. Tonks and I have grown rather close in the last year, to the point where we're essentially partners,

and she really let me have it. I'm sorry for doubting you, Harry," he said, using his given name for the first time. "But..."

"But you don't think I can trust Edwin and Gavin."

"I don't. They murdered people, Harry, and they did it willingly. Maybe they didn't enjoy it, but it didn't bother them. They think of Muggles and Muggle-borns as sub-human. I can't bring myself to trust anyone like that."

"The enemy of my enemy is my friend," Harry remarked. "I don't like them either, Kingsley. But you can't deny their skill as fighters."

"No, I suppose I can't," Kingsley said. "Just be careful, Potter. No ex-Death Eater is to be fully trusted."

"Except Snape, I suppose."

There was brief flash of surprise on Kingsley's face, followed by a look of exasperation. "It was probably foolish of me to assume you didn't know about Severus's past."

"It was," Harry agreed. "Especially when one considers the history between him and Daphne. Daphne hasn't been a perfect parent, Kingsley, but she does not send me into any potentially dangerous situation ignorant of the perils."

Kingsley eyed him warily. "You want me to support your inclusion in the Order, don't you?"

Harry smiled. "I'd greatly appreciate it if you did. I'm pretty sure I've just negated all of your reasons to oppose my induction. If not, I'd be happy to assuage your fears."

"Spoken like a true Slytherin, Potter," the former Gryffindor growled. "Alright, you've won me over. I expect Daphne will introduce the motion again in our next meeting. I'll support you."

"Thank you, Kingsley," Harry said, his gratitude genuine.

“You’re a strange lad, Potter,” the man said. “But you know, I think I’m starting to like you.”

To say that the air inside the drawing room of Black Manor, only recently cleaned out and designated as the place where the Order would hold its weekly meetings, was tense would be a tremendous understatement. Harry focused on listening to the words of square-jawed Sturgis Podmore, keeping his face void of expression, and resisting the urge to shoot glares back at Alastor Moody, Molly Weasley, and Emmeline Vance. He leaned against the wall, having been effectively denied a seat, as well as instructed to refrain from speaking by McGonagall, on Dumbledore’s orders. He seemed to feel the more senior members of the Order, who were already unhappy that he’d been inducted less than a month after his 15th birthday, would be a bit less angered if they thought he was just there to listen, and was not in truth a full member. Tonks, who had unofficially received full membership, promised to make herself heard if the need arose. The Metamorphmagus, wearing her natural looks to avoid attention, sat beside Charlie Weasley at the large polished mahogany table that had been taken from another part of the House. Daphne was across the room, her expression cold as ice. Bill Weasley, who’d arrived late, stood a few feet to Harry’s right, and glanced back at him periodically. Sirius and Remus sat near Dumbledore, who was seated at the Head of the Table, flanked by McGonagall and Snape.

Podmore was discussing rumors he’d heard during his regular strolls down Knockturn Alley. Podmore was a quiet, reserved man who didn’t panic easily. He worked part-time at Flourish and Blotts, but mostly lived off the significant inheritance his deceased uncle had left him. He was, according to Daphne, a good infiltrator, a man capable of listening intently to a conversation while not drawing attention to himself. His routines were natural and casual. He maintained his cover well, had a good memory for names, faces, and details, and could summarize what he’d overheard in a brief and cogent narrative.

Having finished his report, he was fielding questions from the Order. Moody, who finally took both eyes off of Harry, was speaking. “Sturgis, in your estimation, what does the average denizen of Knockturn Alley know about the return of He-Know-Must-Not-Be-Named?”

"Very little," Podmore replied promptly. "To be blunt, while Knockturn Alley is the closest thing to a haven for Dark wizards as there is in London, and it was certainly a place of Death Eater activity during the First War, most of the people that live there are pretty harmless. Small shopkeepers trafficking in illicit goods on top of second-rate merchandise, some pretty criminals...Knockturn Alley is where the poor and destitute go because they can afford to stay nowhere else. True, it tends to attract a certain kind of impoverished witch or wizard, but I've learned very little that I didn't know, and heard quite a bit of information I know to be inaccurate."

"Any of our friends gracing the Alley with their presence?" Sirius asked.

"I've seen Lucius Malfoy entering Borgin and Burke's once or twice, saw Thomas Avery the week before he kicked it, saw who I thought might be Grindelwald Parkinson and one of her daughters, though I can't be certain. If they were working on behalf of their master, I didn't see it, I'm afraid," Sturgis finished. Harry noticed Daphne stiffen at the mention of the late Avery patriarch, but thought nothing of it. Daphne had made reference to killing the remaining survivors of the raid that had taken her husband's life in the past, but the way Avery had been taken out didn't fit her style. Killing a person in a duel, or because they were attempting to poison your ward was one thing, tracking them down and assassinating them was another. Harry was confident that Daphne had not yet slipped that far, and for that, he was grateful.

Dumbledore nodded. "Thank you, Sturgis. Severus?"

Snape rose, his eyes scanning the room menacingly, pausing on Harry momentarily before moving on. "I have made some progress infiltrating the Dark Lord's ranks, but he does not fully trust me. The death of Avery has unnerved him somewhat. He does not suspect me, but he is being cautious. He is moving slowly here, in Britain, as we expected, but he is continuing to aggressively recruit and train new Death Eaters on the continent. Bellatrix Lestrange has been dispatched to act as his representative."

"Any new Death Eaters popping out of the woodwork here?" Moody growled.

Severus eyed him with a look of distaste. "A few. Lysandra Mulciber seems to have returned from self-imposed exile, as I was about to report before I was so *rudely* interrupted. I have not seen her myself, but I have good information she is currently staying with the Dark Lord." His eyes moved to Harry, as he continued. "He has not learned of the defection of the Burkes...yet. But I am certain that when he does, he will want to make an example of them. Aiden Greengrass is also of concern to him, but from what I've heard, he will soon be going into hiding." He finally lifted his eyes from Harry and moved them to Moody, and then to Dumbledore. "I have also heard," he said, his voice soft with an underlying anger. "That he asked to be included in the Order of the Phoenix, and was summarily rejected."

"I have made my views on this issue clear, Severus," Dumbledore said wearily. "The Order is to comprise of only those I know that I can't trust absolutely."

"Strange that the only people in that circle of trust are Light wizards, ain't it?" Tonks remarked offhandedly.

"*Auror Tonks!*" Moody snapped.

Tonks threw him a look of false contrition. "My apologies, Commander Moody. Just slipped out, I'm afraid."

"Dark wizards are the *enemy*," Moody growled. "They cannot be trusted, certainly not against their own Dark Lord." He threw a glance at Snape, who sneered back at him. Snape's status as the only Dark wizard in the Order earned Moody's ire quite often.

Daphne shot Harry a warning glance. *Don't. Say. Anything*, it said. A good thing, because Harry wasn't far from bisecting the table with a Severing Curse just to see how they'd react to his casual use of forbidden magic.

"Would you like me to complete my report?" Snape asked. "Or would you prefer to continue?"

"Go on, Severus," Dumbledore said, glancing wearily at Moody, who remained silent.

"Very well," the man said softly. "I heard something yesterday that I have not heard it some time. I heard the name Rosier, in a sentence with a verb of the present tense."

"Impossible," Remus said instantly. "The Rosiers are all dead. They were at the forefront of the last war, and they all paid the price for it."

"So we believed," Snape said. "But I know what I heard. The full sentence, spoken by Lucius Malfoy to a man I believe was called Gibbon, was, 'Rosier has performed well.' Gibbon assented. They moved away before I could catch any more of their conversation, and since I was already leaving, I could not follow them."

"I knew Gibbon," Shacklebolt said. "Ravenclaw in my year at Hogwarts, minor Dark family. First name's David. Bright enough fellow, probably a new recruit. Daughter graduated Hogwarts last year, right?"

McGonagall nodded. "Alexandra, in Severus's house. She was cold, but she did not strike me as the type that would join the Dark Lord."

Snape made what might have been a derisive grunt, and McGonagall glared at him.

Dumbledore nodded gravely. "We will look into this. The Rosiers, though few in number, were Lord Voldemort's most fanatical and capable servants. If one has escaped justice, we must investigate. We will also seek to learn more about David Gibbon. Is there anything else?"

Snape nodded. "Yes. Something is happening, and happening soon. Something quite large in scale and ambition. I do not know what it is, I do not know when it will happen, but I've heard vague references to some operation. As I said, the Dark Lord does not entirely trust me, so I don't know precisely what is happening."

"Could he be making a move on the Prophecy?" Hestia blurted.

Harry's mind, which had been drifting somewhat, was jolted back into awareness. "Jones!" Emmeline hissed.

"What Prophecy?" Harry asked, standing up straight. He knew the answer to the question already; it was the Prophecy that he knew only in vague terms. What he knew was more than sufficient to explain why Voldemort might want to get his hands on it. But he wanted to see just how much Dumbledore actually trusted him, and this was as good a test as any.

No one said anything for a moment. Daphne hadn't even moved. "What Prophecy?" Harry repeated, a touch more insistently the second time.

Dumbledore sighed. "Harry already knows a bit about the Prophecy in question, including that it involves him and Lord Voldemort, and explains why Voldemort tried to kill him as an infant. He also knows that it cannot be allowed to fall into the wrong hands. Sirius, could you explain what we know about Lord Voldemort's plans for his and Nymphadora's benefit?"

Black nodded. "Alright. Basically, you two, there is a Prophecy being stored in the Department of Mysteries. Voldemort wants it. The only people that can safely remove the Prophecy are those about how it was made."

"Voldemort would have to be mad to just carelessly waltz into the Ministry of Magic," Harry interrupted.

Sirius, to his credit, didn't visibly react. "Yes, he would. We're not how he's going to try to get at it. We're trying to find out. In the meantime, we're keeping a guard on the Department of Mysteries at all times, so that we'll know if Voldemort tries something."

"You said something about Prophecies and how they are removed?" Harry asked. He didn't really know much about the subject.

"Yes," Sirius replied patiently. "The Prophecy was made about you and Voldemort. So..."

"If he doesn't want to risk his own skin, he'll probably try to force me to retrieve it for him," Harry said in a dead-sounding voice. "Brilliant."

"As long as you stay at Hogwarts, you'll be safe," Daphne cut in. "I'll be there, along with the rest of the Hogwarts Staff and the Headmaster. Voldemort isn't strong enough to operate within the castle yet, or so we believe. But be wary of a trap."

Harry nodded. "Alright." He looked at Snape. "I apologize for the interruption. Please continue, Professor."

Snape nodded curtly in his direction. "There really isn't much else to tell. But we should be prepared for anything at this point."

Dumbledore nodded gravely. "Very well. All members will be on call at all times. We need to respond quickly, and summon outside aid if necessary. Rufus hasn't gone so far as to promise the support of the Aurors, but if we have credible intelligence, or are actively engaging a group of Death Eaters, he will not hesitate to send a detachment of Aurors to reinforce us. It is possible that Cornelius might be able to override his orders, however, and indeed likely that he will try."

The truth of the man's statement created a long, forlorn silence in the room. The Order faced overwhelming odds, and would have to fight the very government it sought to preserve if it was to operate effectively.

The meeting broke up. Harry slipped out quickly. He had a letter to write.

Perhaps I'll regret accepting the Burkes' offer of alliance. But something tells me I've just acquired a pair of desperate, capable fighters that won't stab me in the back for the simple reason that I represent their only chance for survival.

Remus Lupin gazed warily at his longtime friend. They were in Sirius's bedroom, a place Moony had frequented more than a few times since the Black's only remaining blood heir had invited the Order of the Phoenix into his home, intended almost as a personal affront to his bigoted and Dark family. Indeed, if the screaming of his mother's portrait was any indication, he'd succeed at exacting some form of revenge. Sirius had badly needed a friend, and Moony had been there for him.

The Marauders had managed to gain access to Sirius's house a few times before he was kicked out after 5th year, but their presence had been barely tolerated. They'd been harassed by the foul House-Elf Kreacher, and ended up deciding that their time was best spent elsewhere. As a werewolf, Remus's presence had been even less welcome than his friends'. No kinship existed between Dark creatures and Dark families. In any case, as a friend of Sirius, Remus was hardly a friend of the Black family.

Sirius sat on his bed, decorated in the brilliant gold and maroon of their House. Indeed, Sirius seemed to have made it his mission to duplicate his old dorm back at Hogwarts down to the last detail. He'd mostly succeeded. Remus sat in a worn red armchair across from him. "Alright, Sirius. What's going on?" Remus began, keeping his voice calm and level. Something was definitely bothering his friend, and he had a good idea what it was.

"What else?" he asked in a dead-sounding voice. "He hates me, Remus. I don't know what Daphne's done to him, but..."

"If you continue to blame Daphne for what he's become, you aren't going to get yourself anywhere," Remus said firmly. "Now, I'll be the first to admit I'm not entirely comfortable with the way in which he's been raised. I have my own doubts about Daphne's mental state, and her competency as Harry's guardian. But it is what it is, Sirius, and Harry is what he is."

"I just can't..." Sirius began, then trailed off. "He's so *different*, Remus. He's *cold*. He's *Dark*. He's-"

"*Slytherin*?" Remus suggested. Sirius sighed and shrugged.

"I guess that about covers it," he said in a depressed voice. "I don't know how to get through to him, Remus. He just blocks me out. He hates me."

Remus considered his words for a moment. "I suppose it's possible that he does. To be fair, Sirius, you didn't exactly make a good first impression. No matter what she's done, Harry loves his guardian, and the first thing you tried to do was take him away from her."

"I'm still not entirely sure I didn't have the right idea."

"Perhaps," Remus said with a sigh. "But what is abundantly clear is that you went about it the *wrong* way. You were an innocent man, yet you behaved like a criminal. What sort of message do you suppose that sends?"

Sirius didn't have a response to that, although his shoulders slumped even further. "James told me that I was supposed to take care of Harry if anything happened to him and Lily. I'm his Godfather, Remus. It was *my* responsibility."

"I know," Remus said, his voice quiet. "Lily was already a bit wary of what Daphne had become, which is why she was never asked to be Harry's Godmother."

"Lily was a bright one, wasn't she?" Sirius asked bitterly.

Remus nodded. "She did love Daphne, though, Sirius. Her methods might be...questionable, but for ten or so years of Harry's life, she gave him a mother that he would not have otherwise had. Things really didn't start to go wrong until they came back to England. I suppose Daphne's past started to catch up with her."

Sirius ran a hand across his eyes tiredly. "I suppose there's nothing we can do at this point."

"No, there isn't," Remus said firmly. "She's his guardian, and neither one of them is going to allow that to change. We can still watch out for him, though."

"I don't *know* him, Remus," Sirius moaned. "I missed his entire life. I don't understand what made him turn out this way."

"He was always bright and curious, from what I've heard," Remus said wearily. "He had a lot of problems his first few years at Hogwarts. Bullying, from a number of different sources. He was an outcast, even though he's since gained a few friends. He's been through a lot, Sirius. It takes its toll after a while."

"He's angry."

"He is," Remus admitted. "Angry at a lot of people. Can't say I blame him for that."

"I guess I can't either."

Remus paused. "Harry's still a good person, Sirius. Have you heard how he's taken Alice and Frank's son under his wing? Poor boy was a mess when I taught him. He didn't believe he could do anything. No one bothered to try to make him see differently until Harry. If Harry had become...*Snape*, let's say, do you think he would have done that?"

"Not a chance in hell," Sirius replied. "I don't think he's *that* bad, Remus, I just..."

"What happened between you two recently?" Remus asked abruptly.

"I found him in Regulus's room, admiring the décor," Sirius replied. "I yelled at him, we fought, he did something to me and just let me have it. I'm not sure I've ever felt so ashamed in my life."

"You say he did something to you?"

"Froze me, somehow," Sirius explained. "I couldn't move, I couldn't speak, I could just listen."

Remus was intrigued by that. "Sound like anyone we know?"

"Yeah, that's what he said. I knew he was powerful, Remus, but..."

"You have no idea," Remus told him. "You have no idea what he's capable of. Werewolves are...attracted to very strong magic. If bonds of friendship or kinship already exist, it makes the pull even stronger. The first time I felt it was when he summoned his first corporeal Patronus. I couldn't believe it at the time. For an instant, my wolf and I wanted the exact same thing. We wanted to serve him, to do his bidding."

"That's downright creepy, mate," Sirius replied.

"Is it?" Remus asked. "He's our last, best hope, Sirius. He's our *only* hope."

"We've got Dumbledore."

"Dumbledore isn't going to live to see the end of this war."

Sirius's eyes widened. "And how exactly do you know *that*, Moony? Did you become a Seer while I was locked up in Azkaban?"

Remus shook his head. "I don't know how I know that, but I'm absolutely sure of it."

"And I thought I was losing it!" Sirius said loudly, throwing his hands in the air.

Remus shot him a withering glare. "You aren't taking this seriously. For Merlin's sake, can you please just shut up and listen? Harry's not a *child*. He's much, much more than that. He's...well, I don't really know *what* he is. But I know beyond the shadow of a doubt that he *is*."

"You aren't making the slightest bit of sense, and I mean that, Moony," Sirius replied. "I don't even know why I'm still *here* anymore. I'm not allowed to leave the premises because I'm a wanted fugitive and a security risk, I can't begin to understand this destiny that surrounds my own Godson, my aforementioned Godson doesn't want me around, and everyone thinks Azkaban messed with my head!"

"I want you here, Padfoot," Remus told him, his voice quiet. "You're the only friend I have left. The Marauders have got to stick together, you remember that. I know that it's difficult, but you've got to just let it go."

"I know, Moony. Believe me, I know what it's like to be all alone. I wouldn't wish that on anyone."

"Then you'll do us all a favor and back off a little," Remus growled. "I heard what you said to Ginny, what you called her."

"That was a bit much, I'll admit," Sirius said. "I shouldn't have said that to her. She's just a kid."

"She's a lot more than a kid, Padfoot, but that doesn't matter," Remus said. "Harry went into Slytherin *before* she did. How on earth is it *her* fault?"

Sirius just shook his head. "Molly Weasley would kill me," he said, chuckling. "She's come close more than once. That woman's insane."

"She's perfectly stable, Padfoot, she's just a bit...extreme when it comes to certain things."

Sirius chuckled. "Boy, I wouldn't want to be Harry if she ever catches him in bed with her daughter."

Remus couldn't suppress a smile. "No, I don't envy him should he ever find himself in that situation."

Sirius laid back, fingers laced behind his head, a bemused grin on his face. "Never let that happen to me."

"You never slept with anyone where her mother or yours could find you together," Remus reminded him. "You know, I was amazed by your resourcefulness while we were at school. Of course, it was James who helped you learn how to transfigure small objects into a mattress."

"Oh James!" Sirius moaned melodramatically. "So pure, so virtuous."

Remus snorted. "You know as well as I do that the only reason he never acted on any of his...impulses was because he was so head-over-heels in love with Lily. He certainly attracted interest."

"Is that jealousy I hear, Moony?" Sirius asked, wearing a playful grin.

Remus gave him a poisonously sweet smile. "As success with the girls go, I wasn't quite as...accomplished. Although," he added, smiling. "I did go out with Daphne."

Sirius groaned. "Low blow, Moony. Very low blow."

Remus's smile faded. "There's a part of me that can't reconcile that the sweet, bright, beautiful girl that let me take her to Hogsmeade is the same person as the Grey Maiden, the angel of Dark vengeance that also masquerades as Harry's rightful guardian."

"Glad to see we feel the same way, at least about that."

"I meant what I said earlier," Remus said firmly. "She's his guardian, and that won't change. You can't make it change. But I don't think she's fit. She's dangerous. She knows she's fallen, but she doesn't understand how far, or how it can and has hurt the people around her. She's lost, Sirius. She doesn't understand what she is anymore. She lives for revenge, and she lives for Harry. No matter who you are, there has to be something more that you get up for each morning."

Sirius nodded, his face contemplative. "Dumbledore hired her?"

Remus sighed. "He did. It's not as though there's anyone more cut out for training a bunch of young and naïve witches and wizards and teaching them how to defend themselves in real-life situations. It's exactly what the Ministry *didn't* want, though. Fudge was pushing that crony of his, Umbridge. If Daphne slips, they'll be there to make sure no one catches her fall."

"Don't you know it," Sirius remarked. "Bloody idiots, all of them. Only fools would classify you as a Level 1 Dark creature."

Remus's humor completely faded. "I'm as dangerous now as I was then, Padfoot. I won't allow myself to forget that, and neither should you."

"Always such a downer, aren't you, Moody?" Sirius whined. He grimaced. "Things are really getting bad out there, aren't they?"

Remus was thrown by the sudden change of subject, but quickly recovered. "We're in trouble, Padfoot. We don't have the manpower to match Voldemort." Remus considered his next few words. But amazingly, Sirius beat him to it.

“And that’s why Harry’s ally-gathering is so bloody important, isn’t it? Dark or not, *if* they can be trusted, that’s a lot of trained wands on our side.”

“Yes,” Remus said. “Sirius, you’ve got to give him a chance. He’s the most important person on our side in this war. And he does care about you. You’re his father’s best friend, and he doesn’t want to fight with you.”

“I’m pretty good in a duel, too,” Sirius added, but his voice was not egotistical and boasting, rather lifeless and subdued.

“You are. Harry wants your wand at his back. Can’t you give that to him?”

Sirius sat up on the bed, dull blue eyes locking with those of his old friend. “Yeah. Yeah, I reckon I can.” The conviction in Sirius’s voice was real. The fire burning behind his eyes was real. And his desire to get along with Harry and help him win this bloody war was *real*.

Remus smiled. Maybe things might get better after all.

Maybe.

Chapter 5: Down the Gauntlet

Seated in a private room at the *Leaky Cauldron*, Harry flashed a false smile at the woman now sitting across from him as she began digging through her handbag, pulling out a notepad and setting it on the desk. Thin, with a small nose, wearing glasses that made her resemble a beetle, she also featured curly blonde hair that obviously came from a bottle, not from her birth parents. There was a certain hunger in her eyes that was deeply unnerving.

Rita Skeeter relished tearing down legends.

If there was a word that better described the public's perception of him, he'd yet to find it.

"I'd like to thank you for granting me this interview, Mr. Potter," Rita said in her most convincingly pleasant voice, almost making her gratitude seem genuine.

"The public has a right to know they are being lied to," Harry responded smoothly. "I'd simply like a chance to set the record straight. And with that in mind," he said, reaching into his robes. "You will use *this* quill, or the deal is off, and you can ask your editor if he'd like to do a feature column on life in Azkaban."

Skeeter's smile was venomous. "Of course, Mr. Potter," she said, taking the proffered writing implement, a plain white Dictation Quill, surreptitiously sliding her acid green Quick-Quotes Quill under the table, and the second notepad that no doubt rested on her lap.

A whispered incantation later, and both were on fire. Skeeter yelped, nearly falling over backwards as she shoved herself away from the table, swiping frantically at her smoking robes. She glared at him. Harry smiled, allowing her to see his drawn wand. "I don't take kindly to being lied to, Rita. Now *sit*."

Rita's recovery was remarkable, but despite her blindingly pleasant expression, her eyes burned like hot coals. He could see her body tense and relax, as she tried to calm herself. She coolly sat down, taking the white quill and holding it as if she'd never seen such a

thing before. Harry cleared his throat. "Rita, dear, I wouldn't do *that* to you. It *is* a Dictation quill."

Rita was clenching her teeth now. "Of course. Thank you, Mr. Potter, for your generosity."

Harry nodded pleasantly, which seemed to infuriate her all the more. "So, Miss Skeeter, what would you like to know?"

Rita quickly settled in her well-practiced role as a glorified gossip columnist. "Word has reached me that you and the Minister had a bit of a disagreement following the conclusion of the Triwizard Tournament last year. Would you care to elaborate on that?"

Harry kept his voice level, and his expression calm. "Minister Fudge made the mistake of calling my honor into question. He accused me of fabricating my tale of the return of Lord Voldemort."

Skeeter jerked back, and the surprise in her eyes was real. "Then it's true?" she asked, for the first time sounding like an actual human being. Her polished and slippery façade quickly returned. "As I was saying," she continued, regaining her composure, "you maintain that you have been telling the truth all along? Have you evidence to support this claim?"

At that moment, Harry was badly tempted by the possibility of pulling back his right sleeve and showing the hack the best *evidence* he could, but reason prevailed. Besides, it was a tactic that was best saved for when it could create the most shock-value. "It isn't a *claim*, Rita," Harry said, his voice deadly quiet. "Voldemort has returned. I fought him. I almost died. I'm still not entirely sure how I survived."

"Would you...would you care to elaborate?"

"No."

Harry's tone left no doubt that the details of his ordeal were strictly off-limits. "Then perhaps you could comment on the tragic death of your fellow Champion, Cedric Diggory? The Ministry has never released any information, despite their promise of a prompt and thorough investigation."

Harry held back a snort of derision. "I will say this, Rita," he replied, "Cedric was an innocent victim from the beginning. He was a fierce competitor, and we reached the cup at the same time, each of us fighting-tooth-and-nail from the beginning of the Third Task. There was no collaboration. He was Hufflepuff. I am Slytherin. We wanted to bring glory to Hogwarts, but also to our Houses, and ourselves. We wanted to justify this long, grueling ordeal with a tangible reward."

Rita appeared to be considering how she might use that information. "And his death?"

Harry eyed her carefully. "I will tell you what happened. Cedric and I were transported by Portkey to a cemetery on the outskirts of small town called Little Hangleton. I was...incapacitated, but he attempted to escape."

"Clearly, he failed," Rita said, her voice utterly merciless.

"He was stopped and apprehended," Harry said, "by none other than Bellatrix Lestrange. He was made to witness the Dark Lord's rebirthing ceremony. And as a test of his long dormant magic, Voldemort executed Cedric right in front of me. He was defiant to the end."

Even Skeeter had the decency to wait before she asked her next question.

"Can you tell me anything else about the events of that night? You mentioned Lestrange..." She trailed off, trying to prompt a response.

Understanding, Harry smiled bemusedly. "You want names."

"It seems we understand each other, Mr. Potter," Rita replied, her grin downright predatory.

"Isn't that a bit risky?" Harry asked. "These are dangerous individuals. And the Prophet might be charged with libel, assuming your editor even allow you to print their names."

"I believe that *you* would be the one legally responsible," Skeeter pointed out.

Harry shrugged. "Be that as it may, no one would take me seriously if my words were not printed in the column of the reputable and tenacious journalist Rita Skeeter, writing for the best-known and trusted source of news concerning the Wizarding World, the *Daily Prophet*."

Skeeter smiled again. "It seems that Slytherin's proud tradition of manipulation by flattery is alive and well."

"I assure you, that is the case, Ma'am."

"Nonetheless," Rita said. "I'm prepared to take the necessary risks. I don't think you quite understand what it will mean for my career to secure an explosive and controversial exclusive interview with the Boy-Who-Lived."

"Oh, I think I understand that quite well," Harry countered. "I'm not sure that you understand what you might be getting yourself into. This isn't a game, Rita. Your status as a member of the press won't protect you from a Death Eater's vengeance."

"The names, Mr. Potter?" Rita asked, sounding tired.

"Avery. Malfoy. Crabbe. Goyle. MacNair. Lestrangle and Pettigrew," Harry named in quick succession. Including Wormtail and Bellatrix, there had been eleven Death Eaters present, although he hadn't picked up any other names.

As he'd expected, the last name had stopped Rita dead. "You can't be serious," she breathed. "*Pettigrew?* As in *Peter* Pettigrew? It seems you have some explaining to do, Mr. Potter. Surely you didn't think you could casually drop the name of a dead man and just continue on your merry way."

"Of course not, Rita," Harry replied. "It's quite simple, really. Sirius Black is innocent. Peter Pettigrew was Voldemort's spy within the Light, and it was he who betrayed my parents. Sirius tried to take his revenge, but Pettigrew faked his own death, blew up that street, and framed Sirius for the entire thing. He then spent twelve years as a rat-"

“Awhat?”

“A rat. He’s an unregistered animagus. He and you are kindred spirits, I suppose...As I was saying, he spent twelve years posing as a rat before he was exposed last year and forced to flee. Presumably, he went looking for his master, needing his protection,” Harry explained.

Skeeter made sure that she had all of that written down before she spoke again. “I mean no offense, Potter, but that is anything but *simple*. You are accusing the Ministry of a terrible miscarriage of justice, resulting in the imprisonment and condemnation of an innocent man, a war hero, while the real criminal, assumed dead, escaped into hiding, eventually playing a role in the return of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.”

“Yes.”

“You mentioned Avery? The same Avery who-”

“The very same. He and his father were both devout followers of Lord Voldemort. I don’t have any information on his death, unfortunately.”

“Yes, well...” Rita blew out a long breath. “I must say that I had high hopes for this meeting, but I never would have come up with *this* in any of my wildest dreams.”

“If you ask politely, I might tell you what I think of our current government,” Harry said.

Rita smiled again. “Mr. Potter, what do you think of the way that Minister Fudge is handling the current situation?”

When Harry was done, Rita was having trouble hiding her elation. “Is there anything else you would like to add, Mr. Potter?”

“You need more?”

“I doubt it,” Rita said. “I’d just like to make sure I’m getting the whole story. You’ve made it clear you will not elaborate on the events of the night you claim He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was returned to body,

except to say that he murdered Diggory, and that the two of you dueled. Evidently, you won.”

“You don’t actually believe that,” Harry said. “You’re just trying to make me tell you something I don’t want you to know.”

“Nothing escapes you, does it, Mr. Potter?”

“Very little,” Harry admitted. “There was no winner. We fought, I was wounded, and I managed to escape. I don’t think you really need to know anything else. You have your story, Skeeter. It’s got scandal, accusations, tragedy, injustice...what else could you possibly need?”

“A signed statement confirming that everything you have just told me is, to the best of your knowledge, the absolute and complete truth,” Skeeter said, digging into her handbag. Harry produced a quill and signed the parchment. Both of them rose. Skeeter held out a hand, and Harry took it, staring hard into her eyes. “It was a pleasure doing business with you, Mr. Potter.”

“You know the rules.”

“Of course. I assure you that you will be most pleased by the final product. It should be published by...oh, I’d say Thursday’s edition.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “What happened to your editors pulling the story?”

“I convinced them otherwise,” Rita said, picking at her fingernails. Then she met his gaze. “This story is going to cause an uproar, but that’s hardly important. The *Prophet* is a business, Mr. Potter. And if anything is going to inject a fresh surge of life into our falling sales numbers, this will.”

“Glad that I could help.”

“Oh, the pleasure is all mine,” Rita replied, flashing her most repulsively pleasant smile before she turned around and left.

BOY-WHO-LIVED SPEAKS

TALKS OF CORRUPTION, COWARDICE, AND UNJUST CAPTIVITY

SAYS “THE DARK LORD HAS RETURNED”

A RITA SKEETER EXCLUSIVE

Harry Potter may have turned fifteen just weeks ago, but as this reporter can attest, he is not your typical teenage wizard. Despite the vicious and underhanded attacks on his credibility by a Ministry he disdainfully calls “impotent and frightened,” Mr. Potter has kept his silence. Until now.

Less than a week ago, this Daily Prophet correspondent secured an exclusive interview with the Boy-Who-Lived. Confident, mature, and levelheaded, Mr. Potter made specific allegations that could rock our wizarding world, if true. Among the most explosive, Mr. Potter asserted that Sirius Black was in fact an innocent man, framed and unjustly imprisoned by a Ministry, “So desperate to return to normalcy that it didn’t even give the man a proper trial, even as it accepted bribes from other, more influential servants of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named and allowed them to go free.”

Mr. Potter told this reporter that Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge came to his bedside following his ordeal during the Third Task of the Triwizard Tournament, and “called Dumbledore and I liars for daring to disrupt his idealistic and delusional world-view. You see, for Fudge, the return of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is a nightmare come to life. The man took office with a promise of restoring peace and putting an end to the violence and death. He did just that, with the help of bribes, illegal imprisonment, and other less-than-noble means. Now, this blanket of security and peace that he depends on is being threatened. So what does he do? He ignores it, pretends it isn’t real, pretends that Dumbledore’s senile and I’m an attention-seeking head-case.”

Hermione set down the newspaper, staring questioningly at her best friend. “Just felt like declaring war on the Ministry, did you?”

Harry shrugged. "Skeeter wanted an interview. I had a lot to say. Besides, I wanted Fudge to know that I wasn't bluffing. Skeeter's a deadly weapon when properly used."

"She's a deplorable human being, but I suppose she does have her uses," Hermione replied. "Still, you didn't exactly use restraint."

"Why should I have? Fudge isn't going to come after me."

"What make you so sure?" Hermione asked. "If you scare him enough, he might lash out."

"I'm sure he'll *want* to, but he won't," Harry said.

"Because?"

Harry didn't answer. Instead, he reached into the pockets of his robes and produced a jeweled-encrusted dagger.

"You got that from Aiden Greengrass."

Harry nodded.

"And *that* is going to protect you from Fudge?"

"Not the dagger, per se, although as Kingsley can attest, it's bloody useful," Harry replied. "Hermione, Aiden Greengrass is one of the foremost leaders of the Dark pureblood community. The power and influence he wields is considerable. And now I've entered into a formal alliance with him."

"Fudge is scared of him?"

Harry raised an eyebrow. "A lot of people are scared of Aiden Greengrass. He's got quite a reputation, Hermione. Cross him, and he'll make you regret it. He's just plain dangerous, and he has friends. Fudge won't dare threaten an ally of his. And if he does..."

"What?" Hermione asked. She was getting somewhat irritated with the way Harry was leading her on, taking advantage of her ignorance.

"He's finished," Harry said simply. "He has few allies to call upon, and they are as scared of Aiden and his associates as Fudge is. I've also got Dumbledore's position."

"So what are you trying to accomplish?"

"I'm trying to get inside his head, rattle him a bit. There's a possibility he might see sense and take steps to counter the Dark Lord's activities," Harry explained. "Of course, most likely he'll just retreat farther inside his shell."

"And then?"

"He'll need to be replaced," Harry said simply. "Hopefully we can hold off on that."

Hermione was flabbergasted. "You're talking as if you can just knock him off like *that!* He's the *Minister of Magic*, Harry. He's popularly elected..."

"As much as you might dislike the terrible flaws in our system, when manipulated properly, they become a little less of an eyesore," Harry said. "If the need arises, Aiden can probably help me remove Fudge. We'd need the support of his successor, of course. And it won't be simple. It's possible it might not even work. But it's not out of the question. Fudge is Voldemort's best asset right now. He's paralyzing us. I hate the bastard, Hermione. The price of his brazen incompetence is going to be paid in blood."

Hermione couldn't come up with much of a response to that. "Perhaps you might want to just be a little cautious when dealing with people as powerful as the Minister, even if the man isn't the sharpest tool in the shed."

"I didn't say he was stupid," Harry pointed out. "I said he was a coward."

"You know what I mean," Hermione said. "I just want you to be careful. You've gotten better over the years, but you still have these delusions of grandeur every once in a while. I'm just trying to play devil's advocate. Fudge isn't *that* good an actor. If he got himself elected in

the first place, he had to have wealth and supporters willing to let him represent their interests.”

Harry seemed to consider that. “I hadn’t really looked at it like that,” he admitted. “Thanks. There’s a reason you’re a prefect, I reckon. Not quite sure what Dumbledore was thinking with me.”

“I’m your friend, Harry,” Hermione said softly. “It’s my job to rein in your ego. And Dumbledore recognizes that you need to take a leadership position in the student body. This is his way of helping.”

Harry chuckled. “I suppose it is, yes. On both counts. And I’m sure Augusta Longbottom hit the roof when she saw that badge.”

His friend smiled, but it faded. She sighed, glancing down at the *Prophet* again. “Not that I don’t agree with everything you told that woman, of course. Still, you’d think a Slytherin would be a bit less...reckless.”

“I’m not worried about it,” Harry said dismissively. “Fudge won’t go after me for something like this. He’s too cowardly to risk his own skin, or even his reputation. With Skeeter on my side, it shouldn’t be difficult to turn him into a pariah.”

Hermione nodded. “That’s true,” she admitted. “Just...lay low for a little while, alright? Try not to attract so much attention to yourself.”

Harry nodded in agreement, glancing back down at the battered tome in his lap, gingerly turning an aged page. “Hermione, I’d like to ask you about something.”

The Gryffindor looked up at him, surprised. She wasn’t sure what to make of his tone of voice. While not exactly forced, something was still...off. With a bit of trepidation, she replied, “Alright. What is it?”

“You and Ginny are pretty close,” he said. “I’m sure there are some things she tells you that she doesn’t tell me.”

You would be correct, Hermione thought. Ginny was her only close female friend, and the two of them would occasionally discuss certain...subjects that Harry, like most boys, was neither

knowledgeable about nor at all willing to discuss. They talked about other things in their private conversations and letters, of course. Things that Harry wasn't always privy to. Hermione had always kept the confidences of her friends, and that wasn't about to change. "I can't discuss anything that she hasn't already told you about," she said. "That's not my place."

Harry got up from the couch and moved to sit beside her at the carved oak table in the Black Family Library. "I'm not asking you to betray her secrets or anything like that. I just..." he trailed off. "Is she alright? It's just...when we're together..." Harry took a deep breath, but Hermione could see the genuine concern in his eyes. "Normally, everything's fine. She's happy, I'm happy, we can both forget about everything for a little while, but sometimes...she's just not right."

"I'm not sure I follow," Hermione said. There was desperation in Harry's eyes that bothered her. This *suspicion* of his wasn't a new development. He'd been holding this in for a while, trying to sort it out on his own. That he was turning to Hermione demonstrated just how badly he wanted to solve the mystery of Ginny's at-times standoffish behavior. "Is she hiding something from you?"

"That's what I wanted to ask you," Harry replied.

"I don't think I know anymore than you do, Harry," Hermione replied. "Honestly, the only thing she's confided in me that could be at all related to this was she was still having nightmares about what happened in the Forest. She also said she was a bit nervous about how her family might react if your relationship got...serious."

"Isn't it already?" Harry asked, raising an eyebrow.

Hermione shrugged helplessly. "I wouldn't read too much into that."

"Oh, I know exactly what she's talking about," Harry assured her. "She's probably right to be anxious about the whole thing. The Weasleys don't trust me, Hermione, and most of them actively dislike me. Even the Twins are a bit uncertain about me. Ron...well, there's always going to be something to come between us. At least he's civil."

"He's gotten much better," Hermione admitted. "Still, the fact that he harbors feelings for me...I mean, honestly, after everything we've gone through, everything he's done, everything he's said..." Hermione trailed off, unable to finish the thought. She hated even thinking about Ron Weasley. All it did was make her angry. She still couldn't believe how cruel he'd been.

"He's a bloke, Hermione, and not one skilled at hiding his feelings," Harry said. "You shouldn't hold it against him. Isn't it flattering, in a way?"

Hermione huffed in response. "Hardly. Well, I suppose as he knows that nothing will ever come of it..."

"He'll never completely give up hope, but I think he's come to the realization that as things stand right now, you'll never give him a chance, and that he doesn't really deserve a chance in the first place...put it out of mind, Hermione. It really doesn't matter."

"No, I suppose it doesn't," Hermione agreed, sighing. "I don't feel anything for him, anyway. Well, nothing besides bitterness and contempt."

"Stop dwelling on it," Harry snapped. "Focus."

Hermione bit back a retort. He was right, of course. She just wished he could be a bit more diplomatic. Then again, given how stubborn she was, maybe he'd done exactly what was necessary and guaranteed to work. He knew her too well, she realized. "Alright. We were talking about Ginny."

He nodded.

"I really can't shed any light on it, Harry," Hermione said. "I'm as much in the dark as you are. Though..." she trailed off, cursing her thoughtlessness. There was no way Harry was going to let her get away with that.

"What?" he demanded. "What is it? Don't tell me it's nothing. I'll make that decision on my own."

Hermione took a deep breath, making eye contact with her best friend. "She seems most uncomfortable when she's around Daphne."

Harry stared at her incredulously. "That's ridiculous," he said. "Why would she be frightened of Daphne? I mean, bloody hell, Hermione, she's seen the Grey Maiden at her *weakest*! If Ginny hadn't managed to fight off Riddle when she did, Daphne wouldn't have made it. She's never seen any of the...*things* she's done firsthand. It doesn't make any *sense*!"

"It was just an observation," Hermione replied in a soft voice. "I don't have any idea what the cause of her behavior is. But something's...*off* when she's around your guardian."

"You're grasping at straws," Harry replied dismissively.

"Maybe I am," Hermione replied, giving up a little faster than she might have. She hoped that agreeing with Harry might stop this conversation dead in its track. The truth was that she had her *own* doubts about Daphne Dressler. She wasn't sure that her behavior could be explained by emotional stress or excused because the people she was torturing and killing happened to be Death Eaters. But this was neither the time nor the place to bring this up, and she assumed a resigned expression.

Content with his victory, Harry continued. "I wanted to run something past you."

"Go on."

"It seems rather inevitable at this point that our classmates, as well as the students a few years above and below our year are going to be heavily involved in this war...on both sides," Harry added. "Obviously, I'm more concerned with the ones that might be fighting alongside us."

"I think I see where this is going," Hermione said.

"Yeah, I guess you had the same thought."

Hermione nodded. "Honestly, Harry, we've had loads of training, and I still feel as if I still have so much to learn, so much room for improvement. I think you're the only one of us that would stand a chance against a Death Eater."

"Well, that depends," Harry pointed out. "There's little shame in being outmatched by a Bellatrix or a Dolohov. But while Voldemort didn't exactly mark anyone that could hold a wand straight, some of his servants are considerably less capable than some others. And you have some of your own unique...talents that you've yet to master."

"If I ever do," Hermione said, sighing. True to her nature, and her word, she'd thoroughly reviewed the material provided by McGonagall. And while she certainly had a better theoretical grasp, and some promising ideas, she was still intimidated by the very nature of her power. Perhaps it was because in this context, fire was destructive by nature. If she could harness her abilities she could...well, she could probably kill people, and without all that much effort. Did she *want* that? Would the fact that those she killed had done enough to deserve it make it any easier? How would it change who she, Hermione Jane Granger, was as a person?

These were questions she had yet to answer. And she had the growing suspicion that they might never be answered, not until the situations she envisioned had transformed from the hypothetical to the concrete. It was deceptively easy to take a life, she had decided. Some, even decent people, did it and just accepted it, never sparing a thought for the repercussions of ending a human life. Some did it for the thrill. Some did it in the throes of base passions. Some did it to preserve their own life or that of another they cared about. Some did it with the greatest reluctance; some did it with exquisite relish.

Harry was staring at her now, his expression unreadable. "Hermione, what are you thinking about right now?"

"Death," she answered. "Killing."

Harry nodded, but his visage refused to betray approval, concern, contempt...anything, really. "I think I understand now. I suppose I should have seen this earlier."

“Seen what?”

“Your fear. Your revulsion.”

Hermione’s cheeks burned for some reason, and she ducked her head, staring at the floor. She didn’t know why, but she felt weak, pathetic. How could she ever fight at Harry’s side if she couldn’t stomach the thought of killing some of the worst people this world had to offer? She *wanted* to help him, to protect him, to guide him, as a friend should. But *could* she?

She was surprised when she felt Harry’s arms wrap around her shoulders. She stiffened at first, then gave in, looping her arms around his waist, leaning in to him. He patted her comfortingly on the back. “It’s okay, Hermione. Really. It’s going to be alright.”

After a short while, he pulled away from her. He cupped her cheek with his hand and forced her to meet his eyes. “Listen to me, Hermione. I know you. I’m your best friend. I wouldn’t lie to you about this. You are *not* weak. You are *not* a coward. Your compassion, your thoughtfulness, your morality...these are all things that make you who and what you are. You have no reason to be ashamed of them. War isn’t easy, Hermione. It’s not *supposed* to be easy to take another life. That act goes against the fundamental laws of nature. If it was easy, then you’d be no different than Bellatrix or any of the other psychopaths that Voldemort commands.”

At that moment, Hermione wasn’t sure how Harry knew about her most private fears and doubts, which she’d gone to great lengths to conceal. She didn’t know if she just wasn’t that good at hiding her emotions, if Harry just knew her too well, or if he’d used some form of magic to detect the nature of her thoughts.

At that moment, as she leaned into his warm, brotherly embrace, she didn’t *care*.

Harry abruptly stopped, staring ahead at the black-clad figure standing in the shadow of a small inn, his grey eyes boring into him. On either side of him, Hermione and Ginny stiffened, and the small redhead slowly reached her right hand into the pocket of her robes,

clenching her new wand, a birthday present from her boyfriend. Just 6 ½ inches, ash, with a unicorn hair core, Olivander had described it as “inconspicuously powerful.” A fine choice for Ginny, then, Harry had thought. So far, its performance had not disappointed them. Ginny had become quite adept at using her grandmother’s old wand, but Ginny was never going to reach her full potential wielding the eight-inch, phoenix feather core, willow wand that had once belonged to Juliana Prewett.

“Wait here,” he whispered, his voice barely audible over the hustle and bustle of Diagon Alley.

Ginny’s left hand held his for longer than necessary, but she finally let go. Harry cautiously moved forward, hands at his sides, palms toward outward in what was ostensibly a non-threatening gesture. Of course, given that his wand was slipped into a dragon-hide wrist holster, his open palms meant was nothing more than symbolic. If the young man tried anything, Harry would be ready.

“Draco,” Harry said quietly, his voice coldly indifferent.

His Slytherin classmate turned to face him. Harry’s eyes narrowed a bit. Something had changed. While his rival’s physical appearance differed from the last time Harry had seen him; he’d grown out his hair, perhaps trying to acquire the appearance of the elder Malfoy, there was another fundamental change, one that was laid out clear to see in his hardened eyes. Beyond his aesthetic attributes, *everything* had changed.

Gone was the haughty bearing, the petulant sneers, the childish glares, the clenched teeth that betrayed an untamed temper. Draco Malfoy had undergone a transformation, one of mind and personality. That much was unmistakable. The question then, was if Harry ought to concern himself with it. Draco had been the victim of his own spoiled upbringing, become used to being given the world while not earning an inch of it, become used to the undeserved praise, the respect he generated among the Slytherins that was the result of his surname, and the infamous...*accomplishments* of his father, rather than anything that man’s son had ever done or said.

Harry had shattered that world of delusion and fantasy, just as he'd intended. He'd trapped Malfoy like a rat, forced him into a one-on-one confrontation in front of their peers, put every ounce of his reputation on the line, even as he'd made Draco do the same. Harry's decisive and spectacular victory had erased any status that Draco had once had. The snickers and hushed insults that had been whispered behind his back from the moment it was determined that this Malfoy was nothing but an insult to his surname had grown in volume. From that day forth, he was just another uppity 4th year Slytherin with an inflated sense of self-worth and delusions of grandeur. The older students refused to acknowledge them as they once had, the eyes of the younger students had turned to Harry, the victor, and Malfoy had been cast down into the abyss, perhaps never to emerge.

The Draco Malfoy that now stood before him was living proof that he'd clawed his way out, rebuilt himself, remade himself.

"Potter," he responded, but without the customary contempt. Still, his refusal to use Harry's given name indicated that some things remained unchanged. Harry would never think of Malfoy as a friend; no, it might as well be set in stone that one day they'd stand on opposite sides of the same battlefield. Harry's purpose here was to get a read on of his opponent, and assess whether he posed a threat. "You're no worse for the wear, it seems," Malfoy said, his voice utterly emotionless. "Must say I'm a little surprised."

"I've always been good at surviving."

"You're still here. I suppose you'd need to be."

"You've changed."

"You've noticed?"

"I suppose that I brought your world crashing down on you, didn't I?"

"You could say that."

"Your father couldn't have been very happy."

"My father considered it a personal affront. I paid the price. I decided I'd be wise if I learned my lesson."

"Are you up for Round Two?"

This time, Malfoy's emotional mask broke, but his short laugh was one of amusement. "Not at the moment, no. Not until I figure how you are still here."

"Good luck."

"Yes, I suppose I'll need it," Draco said, shrugging. "I don't think we really have much to discuss, do we?"

"Oh, I'm not so sure about that."

"Surely you haven't come to ask me to join your little gang of blood traitors, half-bloods, and mudbloods."

"Not while there's breath in my body."

"That might not be for as long as you think."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Was that a threat?"

"Not really. Merely an observation. I have places to be, Potter. If you'll excuse me."

"Perhaps before you leave, you could tell me why you were waiting here, out in the open, knowing that I would see you."

Draco raised the cowl of his hood as he spoke. "I think you already know." With that, he turned and departed.

Harry gave a forced smile. "Yes, I'll have to watch myself around you, Draco," he whispered to himself. "Though I suspect that you'll be the least of my concerns this year." With that, he also turned and rejoined his friends, who had been watching from a distance. Neville and Luna had joined them, Harry saw. Blaise wasn't coming, though Harry wasn't sure of the reason. His last letter had been...anxious, as well as cryptic. Something was happening.

Neville, displaying a newfound confidence, was the first to ask the question. "What was all that about?"

"Malfoy's grown up," Harry said simply. "It's about time, I suppose."

"What do you mean, *grown up*?" Hermione asked.

"Matured. Come into his own. Learned his lessons. Gained humility. Started working harder," Harry replied. "I kind of expected this, really. I humiliated him out there, stripped him of everything he had. Malfoy's not one to accept defeat easily. Still, there are greater threats."

"That's a wonderful attitude to take," Hermione grumbled under her breath.

"He *feel/s* different," Luna said softly. "More like his father, now. He's lost."

"Lost?" Ginny asked.

"There was never any real possibility he'd actually see things our way, turn against his family," Harry said, still addressing Luna. "This is how it has to be."

"Perhaps," she said sadly. She gave a crooked smile. "Human beings are such disgusting creatures, aren't they?"

Harry couldn't help but nod. While he wouldn't allow that belief to create doubt in his own actions, there were times where he did understand Hermione's disdain for parts of wizarding society.

"I think that's a bit harsh," Hermione said quietly.

"Not everybody is like that," Neville agreed.

"Maybe," Harry replied, not really believing it. Desiring to change the subject, he said, "Have we got everything?" he asked.

"I'll need a new cauldron," Hermione reminded him gently. Harry grimaced. He'd been responsible for the destruction of her old one at

the end of the previous year. "And I think we all need to stock up on Potions supplies."

"The Apothecary it is, then," Harry said, his mind still wandering back to his encounter with Malfoy. Ginny grabbed his hand, and they set off.

Harry tried to make himself forget about the encounter, but his thoughts refused to be subdued. He was frustrated. He'd already decided that Malfoy wasn't likely to pose a significant threat. Not for now, anyway.

A voice spoke in the recesses of his mind. *Maybe it's because you're convinced that the next time you two speak to each other in private, one of you isn't going to walk away.*

The mottled greens and browns of the English countryside flashed by the windows of the Hogwarts Express, the images every so often jolting up and down as the high-speed locomotive would hit a rut in the well-worn steel tracks. Harry stared out that window, and his own reflection stared back at him. It featured a face with sharp features, a few small white scars acquired over the years, a pair of brilliant green eyes framed by wire-frame glasses, and the lower half of his famed scar, just jutting out from under his bangs. His expression was pensive, even serene.

He'd just returned from the Prefect's car, along with Hermione and Neville, who still seemed a little awestruck by the implications of the silver badge glistening on his breast. They'd met the other prefects, learning that the 5th Year Prefects for Ravenclaw were Lisa Turpin and Terry Boot, the Hufflepuffs were Susan Bones and Ernie MacMillan, and Harry's Slytherin counterpart was Daphne Greengrass. The Head Boy was an amiable, if somewhat reserved Ravenclaw named Trevor Pritchard, and the Head Girl a prissy Slytherin named Katharine Washburn. Mary Lochley, now a 6th year, was also there, though she and Harry hadn't spoken. They'd essentially been told what their main responsibilities were as Prefects, given their Patrol times, and told not to abuse their newfound power.

Across from him Hermione leaned up against the wall, legs crossed, perusing their new Transfiguration textbook, every so often flipping back to the Table of Contents and making a note or two, mostly likely next to lessons that she found particularly exciting. Ginny was asleep, her head resting on his shoulder, her regular breathing just barely audible over the din of the steam-powered train. Neville and Luna sat together opposite him, as the enigmatic Ravenclaw explained the details of the *Quibbler's* featured article to him in a hushed whisper. Blaise sat to Ginny's right, engrossed in what appeared to be an old-fashioned dueling manual...but one for blades, not wands. He hadn't yet commented on what had caused him to miss their reunion at Diagon Alley a little over a week ago.

Harry continued to gaze out the window at the pastures, fields, and small towns of rural England. He supposed that the Hogwarts Express had to be invisible to the Muggles living there; a polished, bright red steam engine running at peak efficiency wasn't an everyday sight these days, and it was one sure to arouse suspicion. Perhaps the Muggles could see the tracks, he thought. It was something he might ask Dumbledore the next time they met.

Still, his thoughts now were concerned with the *last* time he'd spoken to the wizened old Headmaster. Though the exact details of the Prophecy remained unknown to him, he now knew enough to understand how devastating it might be if Voldemort were to learn of the contents of that little white sphere in the Department of Mysteries. It had been that concern that led him to track down Dumbledore before he left Grimmauld Place to return to Hogwarts.

"Professor," Harry called from the stairs where he'd been waiting. Dumbledore slowly turned around, his blue eyes alight with curiosity.

"Can I do something for you, Harry?" he asked. His voice was cheerful, but somewhat guarded. Harry's accomplishments over the past few years had taught him to be wary of what might seem like harmless conversations with the Boy-Who-Lived. To be fair, when Harry did talk to Dumbledore, he was often hoping to get something out of the exchange, most often information.

"Given what I know about the Prophecy, it had occurred to me that the best way to keep it from Voldemort might be to just go to the Department of Mysteries, have me remove it, and hide it elsewhere, perhaps within Hogwarts," Harry suggested.

"A fine thought indeed, Harry, but one that has already crossed my mind. Unfortunately, there are serious drawbacks. First, the protection that allows only those about which the prophecy was made to safely remove it is eliminated as soon as it is removed from its cradle for the first time. So anyone could get to it. Second, it would be missed, and news of its absence would undoubtedly reach the ears of those we don't want to be let in on this secret."

Harry considered that. Dumbledore was probably right, he decided. Those risks were far too great. Even if it meant leaving the Prophecy out in the open, it might still be the safer approach to simply guard it where it was.

Dumbledore was making to leave again, but again Harry's voice stopped him. "What about just destroying it?"

Dumbledore measured him with his gaze. "Again, a fine suggestion. Even if the Prophecy were destroyed, three copies of it would still remain, copies stored in the memories of Daphne, Sybil Trelawney, and myself. Unfortunately, the same shortcomings apply. The Unspeakables, although sworn to secrecy, are still Ministry employees. I am certain that one or two of them has speculated as the meaning of 'S.A.T., H.J.P. and T.M.R,'" he continued. "If that Prophecy were to vanish, it would be noticed. Professor Snape would also be in great danger. At the very least, there is a good chance we would lose our spy in Lord Voldemort's ranks. And that is, unfortunately, a risk we simply cannot afford to take. I'm sure you understand."

Harry nodded. He hadn't even thought about the consequences of arousing the Dark Lord's suspicions regarding Snape. Snape was a vital asset, one without which the Order wouldn't be able to operate nearly as effectively as it did. With limited resources, the group needed to have an idea where and when Voldemort would strike, so

that they could take steps to foil his plans. Snape was the sole source of that information.

"Is there anything else you would like to know?" Dumbledore asked.

"If Snape judges my Occlumency up to the task, will you let me know the full Prophecy?"

"That is what I had intended. The unfortunate reality is that if the Dark Lord attacked your mind from close-range, there is almost nothing that could be done to stop him. Tom is the most powerful Legilimens I have ever encountered. He is to the mind arts what Evan Rosier was to the art of assassination and murder. It is a passion of his, one that developed very early during his time at Hogwarts. We failed to recognize the significance of this, and now we are paying the price." The twinkle was gone from Dumbledore's eyes now. "I am one of many that has had numerous chances to take action, to possibly save thousands of lives by preventing the rise of Tom and his transformation into Lord Voldemort. But as they say, 'hindsight is 20/20.' Indeed, part of the reason I have taken such an interest in your own studies is because you greatly remind me of Tom. But from what I have learned through my inquiries, I am not concerned that you are in imminent danger of turning against the Light, either to fight at Tom's side, or fight to take power for yourself. The danger always exists, though, and I am no more immune to it than you. With great power comes a desire to take more power. It is a desire that must be resisted, at any cost."

Harry could only nod. Dumbledore's words echoed his own thoughts.

"I'm afraid I must be going. But if you have any more questions, or would simply desire to talk, my door is always open."

"Thank you, Professor."

"Thank you for trusting me, Harry," he said.

It was at that moment that he noticed the slender young woman standing in the middle of the doorway, staring at him with an expression equal parts amusement and indifference, in a way that only she could pull off. A few inches shorter than him, cold blue eyes,

long, straight blond hair that trailed down her back in a ponytail. Her Hogwarts robes, complete with the new Prefect's badge, were so pristine they looked brand new.

Though he could normally learn very little from looking into her eyes, this was an exception. She wanted him to come with her. Now. She hadn't seemed to indicate that this was the case when he'd seen her in the Prefect's car, but he supposed he might have missed something.

Slowly, gently, he extricated himself from his sleeping girlfriend, gently laying her head down on the seat. Then he quietly exited the car, silently following the enigmatic daughter of his first and most loyal Dark ally. She led him into a cabin that was, by some miracle, empty, though judging by the trunks under the seats and lodged in the luggage racks, it hadn't been that way when they left the station. Harry wasn't sure what Daphne had done with the occupants of the compartment, and truthfully he wasn't sure he wanted to know. Daphne stopped a meter from the window, turning around to face him. Harry moved closer to her, closing the door behind her. Harry didn't even see her draw her wand before she used it to cast a wordless Silencing Charm, ensuring their privacy. "Pleasant summer, Daphne?" Harry asked. He didn't know what she wanted, but he wasn't going to let her dance around the subject like she normally did. The best way to make sure she told him what he wanted to know was to annoy her, he'd learned.

"As pleasant as one might expect a summer spent consolidating all of our family's possessions and then taking what we could into hiding to be, Potter," she said, her use of his surname demonstrating that he'd thrown her off. "Our relocation is, of course, your fault."

Harry shrugged. "Aiden has made his own choices. He made one when he defied the Dark Lord for the first time before his defeat, and he made one when he choose to be the first to rally round my banner."

"So he has," Daphne replied curtly. "I do sincerely hope that his faith has not been misplaced." Harry recognized the underlying threat, and the angry red blotches on the fair girl's cheeks. He'd never seen

Daphne Greengrass like this, and it was refreshing, in a way. For once, he was in control of the conversation, because he still had his composure. Daphne was now on the defensive, attempting to quell her own anger while keeping up with Harry's verbal jabs. It was a daunting task, and she wasn't handling it all that well.

"By the time that becomes apparent, I'll most likely already be dead," he said bluntly. "Your threats don't mean anything to me, Greengrass. Your father has made a choice, and you should support him. He needs you."

"What do you know about my father, Potter?" she spat. "Can you expect the paltry knowledge you've gained from your guardian to be on par with a lifetime of living with the man?"

"Hardly. But I know he's not one to back out on a promise."

"No, he isn't," Daphne admitted. "My own scruples are not nearly as strong. Be careful, Potter. Your actions affect many, including some you've never even met. If you die, we all die."

"Don't you think I understand that?" Harry asked, allowing a bit of exasperation to slip into his voice. "I know better than anyone that I have to be a leader in this war."

"It's more than that, Potter. Without you, the Dark Lord cannot be defeated."

"And what would you know about that?" Harry asked. Sure, Aiden was terrific when it came to research and finding information, but even he couldn't have learned the text of the Prophecy...*right?*

"You should be *dead*, Potter. You should have been *dead* years ago. You should have died at the end of your First Year. There is no reason that you should have survived an encounter with the Dark Lord except for the divine intervention of Fate itself," Daphne contested.

"If you really believe that, why are you so concerned I'll get myself killed, and essentially forfeit the lives of my allies, before I have a chance to defeat him? I'm not saying I think of it that way, mind."

Daphne's gaze was hard and cold. "I don't know, Potter. I don't know why fortune alternately smiles upon you and slaps you across the face. All I know is that you should not be here, and that you still stand before me gives me little confidence that your luck won't run out. You can only have so many near-death experiences before Destiny blinks. When that happens, I will pay the price for your recklessness. Your friends will suffer greatly before they join you. Voldemort will triumph, all because of the insolent Boy-Who-Lived who thought himself invincible." She stopped mid-rant as she saw his facial expression.

"Are you finished? Or would you prefer to go on with your mindless and completely wayward assumptions?"

"Tell me I'm wrong, then," she challenged.

"*You are* wrong," Harry replied hotly. "You're wrong because you assume that I'm too arrogant and ignorant to know and understand everything that you just said. My near-death experiences haven't made me believe I'm invincible; they've served to remind me of my own mortality."

"So you say."

"If you don't want to believe me, than that's your problem. Aiden does, and that's why he committed to me. And it's not as though he's the only one."

"If you are expecting me to be assured by the fact that you willingly let a pair of Death Eater into your camp, I'm afraid you'll be quite disappointed," Daphne bit back. "They've murdered children, Potter. They deserve to be in Azkaban. They cannot be trusted."

"I think they can be trusted to oppose Voldemort. I don't think they can be trusted to keep my interests at heart, or even to not be a danger to me."

Daphne seemed surprised, but nodded. "Good. Maybe you have learned something after all."

"Are we finished?"

"Do you want to be finished?"

"I'm not afraid to stand here and let you have at me," Harry insisted. "I'm just unconvinced that it's necessary."

"I suppose we will be seeing more of one another," she said. "I would venture a guess that I got the badge as the best of a lot of bad options, at least in Dumbledore's mind."

"I would venture a guess that Snape has more to do with the selection of the Slytherin Prefects than Dumbledore," Harry replied. "But I won't disagree with you."

"I also find it surprising that a boy who challenged a fellow student to a duel in clear violation of school rules and against the wishes of the Headmaster would be entrusted with any kind of significant responsibility," Daphne said evenly.

"Life's odd sometimes, you know?" Harry said in response. "He understands."

"Perhaps."

"Is *anything* ever a certainty for you, Daphne?"

The girl's expression was frigid. "That's not for you to know. We're finished."

Hit a nerve, did I? Harry wondered as he left the compartment.

The Great Hall was surprisingly subdued, but the attention paid to the Boy-Who-Lived was far from it. Harry's fame had only grown with the publication of his interview, and just as he'd expected, the article had been polarizing. Those loyal to the Ministry were now entirely convinced he was an egotistical, delusional menace, and the rest were looking at him with a newfound awe and respect for what he'd been though.

For what he'd *endured*.

Harry paid little attention to all of this. At the Head Table, looking terribly out-of-place, sat his guardian, quietly conversing with Professor Flitwick. She wore midnight blue robes and a bit of makeup to smooth, if not conceal, her horrible scars. She'd confided in Harry that she didn't want to terrify the younger students with her appearance while trying to teach them to defend themselves with confidence.

Ginny sat beside him, eyes fixed on her plate. She'd been starving for hours, and was getting more and more impatient. Her stomach was audibly complaining.

Finally, the Sorting began.

Harry watched it with detached curiosity, though when McGonagall opened the Sorting with "Avery, Lysetta," it caught his attention. Predictably, she joined Slytherin, along with Pansy's little sister, Hazel, and a bewildered, frightened-looking lad who look destined for Hufflepuff. His somewhat stunning Sorting just seemed to make him more anxious. Harry felt sorry for the kid, Peter Lowry. He had "Muggleborn" written all over him, and unlike Mary Lochley, he didn't seem to have the self-confidence and wit to fend off the verbal taunting he'd inevitably encounter. Zacharias Smith's younger sister, Alexandra, took the path of the rest of her family into Hufflepuff. The final Sorting was another name known to him. Maximillian Yaxley had no sooner started heading for the Slytherin table than he'd made a beeline for the overwhelmed Muggleborn. *Welcome to Hogwarts, kid. Hope the Sorting Hat knew what it was doing.*

Once McGonagall had taken away the Hat and the three-legged stool, Dumbledore rose. Harry sat up straighter in his chair in anticipation. "Welcome to another year at Hogwarts. As always, I am greatly pleased to see so many new faces, and so many old ones. No matter what you may have been told, these are indeed Dark times, and dangers and trials we face are greater than ever. It is my great hope that in this time of crisis, we will band together in defense of our common freedom and dignity. While I encourage you all to take pride in your House and your House's identity, I also implore you to explore social possibilities beyond your Common Rooms. Inter-House cooperation and respect has never been as important as it is now. I

fully expect all of you to rise to the occasion, and in the process, better the school even as you better yourselves.”

Dumbledore paused, and there was polite applause. *Noble sentiments indeed*, Harry mused. *It's pretty easy to tell that Dumbledore doesn't entirely believe his own words, though. It's too late for some.* His thoughts particularly drifted to the two 2nd-Generation Death Eaters that had just joined his House.

“I would also like to introduce to you former Auror Daphne Dressler, who has agreed to take the position of Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor for the coming term. Mrs. Dressler is one of the foremost experts on the subject, and last year was asked to give lessons on advanced Defense to students at the School of Magical Law Enforcement, while serving as a judge of the Triwizard Tournament. She is excited to have the opportunity to teach, and would like to say a few words.”

She would? Harry asked, surprised. He wouldn't have expected Daphne to draw any more attention to herself than she was already getting. She rose gracefully, but her disfigurements caught the candlelight, and were brutally exposed for all to see. A number of students, who had been leaning forward in anticipation, pulled back slightly. Sensing their reaction, Daphne shifted her face so that her scars weren't so obvious. “Hello to all of you. As Professor Dumbledore said, I am excited to be here, and I am very much looking forward to working with all of you. As the Headmaster has already mentioned, these are not the safest of times, even for those as young as most of the Hogwarts student body. I hope that in my time as Defense Professor, I will be able to make you more aware of the threats that lurk beyond these walls, and teach you to survive in such a hostile environment. I will also teach the standard curriculum, but I feel that such pragmatic lessons are far more important, given the times. Thank you, and I look forward to meeting all of you in person.”

Daphne sat, and the Hall applauded, although it was noticeably subdued. His guardian had been somewhat reserved, but she hadn't made any attempt to deceive her future pupils. Harry could see that

she might soon become a liability to Dumbledore. Hopefully she understood that as well.

The Feast was fantastic, as always. For the first time, Harry and Daphne Greengrass herded the First Years out of the Great Hall and into the dungeons, teaching them the basics of discipline, the current password (Snape evidently *did* had a sense of humor, twisted as it was; the password was “Lockhart”), and answering a few simple questions. The Slytherin First Years were as anxious and awestruck as one would expect any eleven-year old to be in such circumstances. It further reinforced to Harry the point that his class was an aberration, featuring an unusual number of formally-raised pureblood heirs that were far more mature than average. These young Slytherins were children, and they behaved like it. Little Peter Lowry was dead silent, and pale as a ghost. Harry felt for him, but it really wasn't his place to say anything. That said, if he found an excuse, he'd try to help the boy. Just because no one had done it for him didn't mean he was going to let others suffer.

He and Greengrass sent them to their dormitories, then went their separate ways, all without saying a single word to one another. Their relationship was...strained, at best. Harry thought she was overreacting and being both arrogant and stubborn, but then again, she was right now facing something she'd scarcely encountered in the past: uncertainty.

Ginny was waiting for him, and after a few words and a goodnight kiss, he headed down to his dormitory, falling asleep just seconds after his head hit the pillow.

Chapter 6: Conflicts of Interest

"What's our first class?" Blaise asked.

Harry consulted his timetable. "Defense, actually, in about an hour."

"So, what's on Dressler's curriculum?"

"She didn't tell me exactly what she had planned. She was a bit irritated because while she has to teach us the recommended material for the O.W.L., a lot of the information on the new written exam is just rubbish. So it sounds like she'll assign a lot of reading, but leave class time for more practical demonstrations."

"Reckon we'll get to duel?" Neville asked, actually sounding excited by the prospect."

"Eventually," Harry replied. "Daphne's going to have to walk a fine line. As 5th years, she might get away with teaching us combat techniques and spells, but the parents of the younger students will most likely complain. After all, according to Fudge, I'm an egomaniac, Dumbledore's senile, Voldemort's dead, and the world is just peachy at the moment."

"He won't last long," Blaise said.

"I'm afraid that he'll do exactly that," Harry said. "Fudge is a coward, but he's never been accused of political stupidity. He has allies, a whole lot of them. Now, they'll cut and run as soon as he's no longer Minister, but in the meantime, they are a significant hurdles to overcome to get him out of office."

"And maybe you'd best leave that to people that have already taken their O.W.L.s," Hermione grumbled under her breath. Harry ignored her.

"I think that we've established that we really can't do all that much at the moment," Ginny said. "We've got to just wait it out, and hope that he either makes a huge mistake or forces others into action."

"And hope that things don't get too fouled up before that happens," Harry added. He sighed. "At least I've got some friends in high places now, for what it's worth."

"Susan Bones has been looking over at you for a bit now," Neville said.

Harry kept eating. "I know," he said, taking a bite of eggs. "We exchanged a few letters during the summer. This isn't the proper place to talk. I'll make sure to speak with her today or tomorrow."

"What were you talking about?" Blaise asked. Harry realized he was the only one of them...well, besides Luna, but she hardly counted...that he hadn't told about Susan's offer of loyalty. He repeated the basics of her offer, and his response.

Blaise nodded, looking thoughtful. "Have to admit that I wouldn't think to turn to Hufflepuffs if I needed help, but they'd probably be pretty dependable. Bones has a good head on her shoulders. Easy to see where that came from, with her aunt and all."

"She's peaceful," Luna said, startling them. She hadn't spoken a word since they'd sat down.

"Come again?" Hermione asked. She looked skeptical, as she always did when Luna said something unfathomably deep and philosophical.

"How so?" Harry asked. Luna chose to respond to both questions.

"She is at peace," she said to Hermione. "She understands her role in life, her duties, her responsibilities, her family ties, her academic career...and she's content with what she has. Quite rare for one so young," she remarked. "I wouldn't expect it to last, of course."

"How do you *know* things like that?" Hermione demanded, her flailing arms nearly knocking over Ginny's pumpkin juice, which the redhead immediately relocated to the other side of her plate.

Luna shrugged. "You can always hear if you are willing to listen. You can always see if you are willing to look." She adjusted the position of her wand behind her left ear, and then resumed eating in silence.

And that just about ended *that* conversation.

“So, what’s it like being a Prefect?” Ginny asked, trying to lighten the mood.

“Percy enjoyed it way too much,” Harry replied.

“That bad? You haven’t even gone on patrol after curfew yet!”

“Being a prefect is an honor, and carries with it great responsibility,” Hermione said.

“I didn’t say I wasn’t happy to be one, I just said that it isn’t nearly as fantastic as it might seem. It’s just another demand on my time,” Harry explained.

“Might help you get to know Greengrass better,” Blaise suggested. “Who knows, the two of you might even become friends.”

“Ever heard the saying, “familiarity breeds contempt,” Blaise?” Harry asked dryly.

“On the other hand…” he responded, a bit subdued.

“Did you get a chance to meet that kid you were staring at during the Sorting?” Ginny asked. “Lowry, I think it was?”

“Yeah, that’s him. No, he went to bed. It’s not really my place anyway.”

“Prefects should help new students settle in, especially Muggleborns,” Hermione protested. “You should have taken him aside.”

“I reckon that the role of Prefects in Gryffindor and Slytherin are a bit different, Hermione,” Neville said. “Probably seen as a sign of weakness, or something like that.” Harry gave him a surprised look. He hadn’t expected that kind of thoughtfulness out of his friend. And for once, Neville didn’t seem quite so embarrassed.

Hermione declined to respond, probably because she realized it was another argument that no one could win. Gryffindor and Slytherin were irreconcilably different in a whole host of ways, and the way that shows of compassion were viewed was one of them, with Harry's house viewing them as a sin and Hermione's as a virtue.

"I'll try to keep an eye on him," Harry assured her softly. "I can at least do that."

Hermione nodded, and then changed the subject. "Professor McGonagall wants to resume working with me as soon as possible."

"Good," Harry said.

Hermione looked at him curiously. "Are you planning to ask Dumbledore for special training of your own?" There was an edge to her voice that Harry didn't like much. Evidently she still resented him somewhat for pressuring her into accepting her Head of House's offer of outside training. Harry wasn't going to admit he'd been wrong, so he accepted it for what it was.

"The thought had occurred to me, yes," Harry replied carefully. "He hasn't broached the subject yet, and I've spoken to him several times this summer."

"Maybe he wants to make sure that you are willing, first," Hermione said pointedly.

"Do you two really need to do this right here and right now?" Neville asked, sounding exasperated. "Clearly you've got some issues that need to be worked out, but I don't think-

"What Neville's trying to say," Ginny interrupted, "is that none of us want to watch a row between you two in the middle of breakfast. Especially when it involves an argument that neither one of you can actually win."

Hermione blushed a bit, and resumed eating. Harry didn't let his own emotions show. He was concerned by Hermione's hostility, however. As close as they were most of the time, there were certain...divides in

their thinking that could not be bridged. *It doesn't help that both of us are ridiculously stubborn*, he reflected.

"We ought to be going," Hermione said after about ten minutes of short, awkward conversations. She began gathering her things, before she, Harry, Neville, and Blaise headed for the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom.

Somehow, Harry was not surprised when they arrived to find that Daphne wasn't waiting at her desk. He had figured she would want to make a somewhat dramatic entrance. He was not disappointed. As soon as most of the class had settled in, Daphne came striding into the classroom, dressed in dark green robes, black dragonhide boots and a matching belt, wand drawn, her soles slapping noisily against the stone floor. She reached the front of the classroom, spun 90 degrees with military precision, and tapped her wand against the blackboard. The words "Defense Against the Dark Arts" and "Daphne Dressler, Auror Commander (Ret.)" appeared on the board. She scanned the class with piercing eyes, silencing the last of the giggles coming from Parvati and Lavender.

Daphne retrieved the class roster from her desk and took attendance, her voice entirely clinical and devoid of emotion. She neither paused on certain names, nor expressed any sentiments towards certain members of her class. She set down the roster, and looked them over again.

"It's nice to finally get a chance to meet all of you," she began. "I'm Daphne Dressler, and I will be your Defense Against the Dark Arts professor for the coming term. I was a member of Ravenclaw House, graduating with a special staff commendation for academic excellence in 1977. I joined the Aurors later that year, and completed a special training program under the direct instruction of Alastor Moody. I began active service with the rank of Commander in 1978, and served as the leader of Auror Enforcement Group #12 until September 1981, when I resigned my commission for personal reasons. Last year, as Professor Dumbledore mentioned, I served as a visiting instructor at the Auror School, while representing them as a judge in the Triwizard Tournament. This summer, I was asked to take the position by the Headmaster because he wanted me to instruct the

older students, including yourselves, in practical defense. Unfortunately, your education in this subject has been neither consistent nor comprehensive. In this class we will be learning basic defensive and offensive spells, as well as basic dueling techniques. This will involve some physical training. You will be assigned nightly readings from a number of sources beyond your standard textbook, and you will be expected to memorize key information and apply what you already know. I will be assigning essays to test your knowledge and ability to work with the material. My door will always been open if you have questions, concerns, or need assistance understanding the material. Are there any questions?"

The first hand raised actually belonged to Elisha Moon, not Hermione. "Miss Moon?"

"Professor Dressler, while I am certain your instruction will be worthwhile and necessary, will we still be learning the standard O.W.L. curriculum as well?"

Daphne paused a moment before responding. "Because of the importance placed upon your Ordinary Wizarding Levels, the answer to that question is 'yes.' I've tried to design the curriculum and syllabus in such a way that you will be both prepared to meet the demands of the Defense O.W.L. as well as defend yourself against possible threats."

To Harry's surprise, Seamus Finnegan raised his hand, followed by Theodore Nott. "Mr. Finnegan?"

"Ma'am, to what threats are you referring?" the Irish boy asked. Harry winced internally.

"There are many threats out there, Mr. Finnegan, threats that exist in times of peace as well as in times of war. That we are currently involved in the latter makes the training I offer you of even greater importance."

"Ma'am, what war?"

Just shut up, Seamus. He knew that the Gryffindor had been telling anyone that would listen that Harry was crazy.

Daphne's voice was just barely audible. "The war that began the instant that Lord Voldemort's soul was returned to body, at the end of June of this year. The Ministry has denied that such a thing ever happened, of course..." Several of the Gryffindors jumped or squeaked when they heard Voldemort's name.

"And who are you to say they are wrong?" Lavender Brown demanded hotly. Parvati whacked her on the arm.

Daphne's stare was glacial, and Harry could see the blood drain from Lavender's face. "A knowledgeable veteran of the last war, one capable of independent thought and impartial analysis," she replied. "And a mother, whose son was gravely wounded in an incident that the Ministry has decided to pretend never happened."

Eyes turned to Harry, who remained unfazed. He'd expected that. Disappointed by his indifferent expression, they turned back to Daphne. "Is there anything else?" she asked, as if daring them. Theodore Nott's hand remained raised. "Mr. Nott?"

"How do you respond to allegations that you are a murderer, Professor?" Nott asked calmly.

Harry felt the urge to hex the enigmatic Slytherin, but kept his expression neutral. It was up to Daphne now. "I respond by demanding that my accusers produce evidence that I violated any laws. My actions during the First Wizarding War were consistent with Ministry Decree 3042, which authorized Aurors to use 'any and all means necessary' to combat Voldemort and his Death Eaters."

"And that little scene we witnessed out on the Quidditch Pitch last June? What of Alecto Carrow, Professor?" Nott's tone was impeccably polite, betraying nothing but innocent curiosity.

Daphne didn't skip a beat. "I killed Alecto Carrow, a known and wanted Death Eater, because she was attempting to murder my ward. She was responsible, directly or indirectly, for a number of other deaths in recent months, as well as the one responsible for delivering my ward to Voldemort, and making possible his resurrection. I dealt with the situation as quickly and decisively as I could, using a level of force I deemed necessary. I have not been charged with any crime,

and my past does not in any way affect my ability to teach you.” She took a deep breath. “Are there any more questions?” There were none.

Daphne took in a breath, let it out slowly. “Then we’ll begin.” She moved to her desk, and removed a small sack. With a wave of her wand, the contents of the sack were lifted into the air, and came to rest on each of her student’s desks. Another wave, removing the Shrinking Spell, and each of them was staring at a roll of parchment. “This is an excerpt from a book on Defense by Alastor Moody, published in 1973. I want you to read it, take notes if you wish, and be prepared to discuss it. You have twenty minutes. Begin.”

After the grumbles from Gryffindors unhappy about having to read in class had subsided, Harry unrolled his parchment and read carefully. The excerpt appeared to come from the introduction of Moody’s work, and although vague, it was quite interesting. He skimmed the first few paragraphs, as they discussed, in very general terms, accepted notions of Defense theory. The third paragraph, however, Harry found himself reading more than once.

Magic is without question a tremendous gift, but also a very dangerous one. The misuse or abuse of our magical talents can have terrible consequences for us and for others. It does not matter if we call ourselves Light or Dark; the dangerous potential of magic is not constrained by the classifications we, as a society, have imposed on it. Dark Magic is banned for good reason; the vast majority of the spells that fall under that category are meant to inflict pain and suffering on those affected. But ultimately, the nature of the magic becomes less important than the intent of its wielder. When used improperly, a spell as common as the Disarming Charm that was taught in my Second Year at Hogwarts can become a deadly weapon. Where and when we perform magic - or others perform it on us - is as important as the spells that we cast or those that are cast on us.

Defense, then, is not a matter of Shielding Spells or practiced dodges. It is an attitude, one that combines awareness, common sense, and a healthy dose of paranoia. It is true that danger can lurk anywhere, and that we may be in as much danger among those we believe to be our friends as we are in the middle of the Dark Forests of Albania. But

the odds that our lives may be threatened are far greater in the latter scenario. Therefore, as I will demonstrate in these pages, awareness of place and company should take precedence over any other concerns related to personal Defense.

The rest of the except was mostly an outline of how Moody planned to go about proving his theories, using mostly anecdotal and historical examples, with some expert analysis from his peer Aurors thrown in. Harry was starting to see where *Constant Vigilance* came from. To be fair, although Moody was stopping just short of advocating that his readers should trust no one and constantly be looking over their shoulder, Harry could certainly understand his frustration with young witches and wizards who became competent with basic defensive magic and believed they were ready to take on anything, only to walk blindly into a situation where their rudimentary skills were of little use.

It's not as though you couldn't have used his advice in the past, an annoying voice in the back of his mind, one that sounded oddly like Snape, reminded him. That little run-in with Sirius Black comes to mind.

Alright, so he'd made his fair share of mistakes...that being one of the more foolish ones.

He glanced up at Daphne, who was still standing at the front of the room, arms crossed across her chest, surveying the class before her. She caught Harry's eye for a moment, but moved on.

Once they finished, she began quizzing them. Unsurprisingly, many of the Gryffindors were unprepared, and somewhat surprisingly, a number of the Slytherins also stuttered out vague and incomplete responses. Daphne kept pounding them. Harry and Hermione answered their questions without much trouble, but Dean Thomas, seated two rows in front of Harry was speechless when Daphne told him to tell her which normally innocuous 2nd Year Light spell Moody had mentioned as being deadly in the right circumstances. Finally, she provoked the reaction Harry figured out she'd been looking for.

"Professor, with all due respect, why is remembering that kind of detail so important?" Dean demanded.

Daphne's glare was accusatory. "I wouldn't make the mistakes of questioning the importance of what I am teaching you, Mr. Thomas." Dean jerked back, looking frightened, mumbling an apology. "This isn't about class-work anymore. It's about survival. Mr. Thomas, if you were attacked by a Death Eater, what would you do?"

"What?" Dean asked, sounding stunned.

"What. Would. You. Do?" repeated Daphne, unyielding.

"I...I'd run," Dean gasped. "I'd run for help."

"And if there was none to be found? If you were all alone? Nowhere to hide, nowhere to run. Just you and that Death Eater? What would you do *then*, Mr. Thomas?"

"I...I...I dunno," Dean admitted.

"Exactly," Daphne said, her voice just above a whisper. "What spells could you use in that situation, Mr. Thomas? How could you use magic to help yourself?"

"I mean...*Expelliarmus*, *Wingardium Leviosa*..."

"I said a *Death Eater*, not a *garden gnome*, Mr. Thomas," Daphne spat. "You've just illustrated my point better than could have ever hoped to. If you were caught in a life-or-death situation, you wouldn't know what to do, would you? You wouldn't stand a chance. Most of you would be dead...or worse...before you ever knew what hit you. How many of you have heard of the Siege of Hogwarts? How many of you have family that fought in that horrible battle, were killed defending Hogwarts from a threat they could not hope to understand? How many? Let me see. Stand up." It sounded like an order, and really, that's what it was.

Harry rose immediately, but most of his classmates, even the Slytherins, were slower to respond. Ron Weasley rose. His parents had both been members of the Order at that point. Seamus Finnegan rose. His mother had slept in the same dormitory as Lily Evans. Neville Longbottom rose. Both his parents had fought bravely defending the younger students. Millicent Bulstrode rose. Her mother

had undoubtedly fought for her own survival. Tracey Davis rose. Her father must have been a student at the time. Elisha Moon rose. Harry knew her mother had been two years behind his parents, getting pregnant by her Ravenclaw boyfriend just before finishing her seventh year. Theodore Nott's father Richard had seen his older brother join the Death Eaters before his very eyes, then fought to protect their sister, who had ultimately been killed by mistake when the Aurors came for Alexander, bringing the ceiling down on her before they hauled the elder Nott brother off to Azkaban. Daphne had told him that last story this summer, when he'd asked about the Notts.

"Ask your parents. Ask your aunts and uncles. Even if they weren't there, even if they didn't fight, they heard the stories. They saw the images. They remember."

Daphne strode over to her desk and sat down. "I took this position for one reason. In 1976, countless children, including many your age, died for no reason other than that they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. Even those that chose to fight, and they were by no means the only ones that were killed, stood little chance against Voldemort and his armies. I made a promise to myself that I would never allow that to happen again. What I want, *all* that I want, is give you a chance to survive when your time comes. And trust me, no matter what your parents may tell you, no matter what the Ministry tells you, that time *will* come. You can sit down, now," she told them. Once they were seated, she rose and walked up to the front of the classroom.

"Do you understand, now? Does what I'm trying to teach you finally make sense? I know that some of you would rather be learning the boring old material for your O.W.L.s, but if you don't survive long enough to take them, what's the point?"

Daphne sighed. "Class isn't over yet, but you are dismissed. No homework except to think about everything I've told you. We'll discuss your reactions next class."

The shock wore off the Slytherins first, with Draco Malfoy leading the exodus out of the classroom. The Gryffindors got up slowly, keeping their eyes on Daphne as if she was some dangerous animal about to

charge. Without even being asked, Harry stayed behind. He had a little while until his next class anyway. Blaise lingered a bit, but left after Harry gave him a nod of approval. Hermione left without even a glance. When they were all gone, Daphne finally spoke. "So, how did I do?"

"Well...if you were trying to make a strong first impression, I reckon you did a smashing job," Harry replied dryly.

"Was it that bad?"

"You probably scared a few people," Harry said. "I understand what you were trying to get at by talking about the Siege of Hogwarts, but I'm not sure that was the best thing to talk about on your first day of class."

"They weren't taking things seriously," Daphne argued. "Well, at least a few of them." She was struggling to justify her behavior.

"I won't disagree with you, but I suggest you tone down your approach a bit for the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws. You can't *force* them to show enthusiasm for the material. You also can't expect the entire class to listen to you with rapt attention on the first day of class," Harry said. "I understand that what you are trying to teach is important, but you've got to take things slower."

Daphne sighed, running a hand over her face. "I'm not cut out for this job, Harry. I'm not a teacher. I don't have the patience."

"You'll learn," Harry told her. "You were - and still are - a fine teacher to me."

Daphne laughed tiredly. "You aren't exactly a representation of the average student, Harry. You're the farthest thing from it."

"That doesn't matter," Harry argued. "I know it's difficult, because they don't want to be told that their lives might be in danger at any moment."

"They want to have *fun*," Daphne almost spat.

Merlin Forbid that! Harry's inner cynic exclaimed. He fought it back. "I suppose they do. And I realize that you can't really give them that, but you've got to...be patient with them, I suppose. I wouldn't worry about the Slytherins, anyway. They either know it already and or will learn it, all the while pretending they aren't paying attention. You've got to take a different approach with the younger classes. Treat them the way their age dictates."

Daphne nodded. "I will. Thank you."

Harry smiled and clapped her on the shoulder. "Hey. Everybody's allowed a second chance. And sometimes a third. And maybe a fourth, if you're lucky."

Daphne moved quickly, and pulled him into her tight embrace. Harry hugged her back, laying his head on her shoulder. Despite his growth spurt, Daphne still had a few centimeters on him. For now, at least. "I love you, Daphne," Harry whispered. "No matter what has or will happen, never doubt that."

"I know," she replied, her voice heavy with emotion. "I love you too, Harry. I don't know what I'd do without you."

"You won't ever have to find out, I promise," Harry said. They both let go, and stood there, mother and son staring into each other's eyes. "You're going to be okay, Daphne. You'll be a great teacher, you'll see. Just...back off a bit, and keep your sprits up. Hogwarts wasn't built in a day."

"You know that I am supposed to be the one telling you these things, and not the other way around?"

Harry smiled. "Well, like you said, I'm not a great representative of the average teenager."

"Student," Daphne corrected, probably more out of habit than anything else. She shook her head. "It doesn't matter."

"No, it doesn't," Harry agreed. "There's something to be said for being consistent, though."

Daphne smiled. It was one of the first genuine smiles he'd see in quite some time. "Go on, you," she said, reaching out and ruffling his hair. "If you are late for your next class, I won't be your excuse."

"Traitor," Harry groaned. "See you, Daph." He turned and left. As he reached the door, he heard her reply.

"Goodbye, Harry."

He paused, and considered turning back to say something...he stopped, and continued on his way. He cast a time spell, then seeing he had only minutes, he quickened his pace. He stopped as he saw a tawny owl flying towards him. It dropped a roll of parchment, which Harry instinctively reached out and caught, before continuing on. Puzzled, he unrolled the parchment.

Harry,

Meet me in front of the main entrance to the school tonight after dinner. We have a great deal to discuss.

Susan Bones

The sun had begun to slip beneath the horizon as Harry slipped out the massive oak doors onto the grounds. There was a chill in the air, tolerable, but still noticeable even with the jumper Harry wore under his Hogwarts robes. Susan hadn't told him where she would be, but he knew that if he looked hard enough, he'd find her. She wasn't one to lead others on for her own amusement. Far from it, in fact.

Sure enough, she stepped out from behind a trimmed bush. Susan was tall, regal, and dignified, though not possessing the haughtiness or cold elegance of a Daphne Greengrass. Her dark brown hair worn in a long plait down her back, brown eyes warm and inviting. Though not quite as imposing or refined as her aunt Amelia, Susan was, by all accounts, a fine representative of an old, storied Light family. Her mother Sarah, her father Christopher, and her uncle Edgar had been murdered by Voldemort's Death Eaters, so she too was a war orphan. And just like him, had been entrusted to a strong and powerful witch at a young age.

Susan also didn't waste time. "Walk with me," she said, and began moving without waiting for a response. Harry hurried over and fell into step with his Hufflepuff classmate. "You've had an interesting year, haven't you, Harry?"

"You could say that," was his guarded response.

Susan nodded. They were headed toward the gardens near the greenhouses. *Familiar territory*, he supposed.

"Word has it that you've reached out to the Dark purebloods, including an alliance with Aiden Greengrass and the Burkes. A bit hasty, don't you think? I suppose that as the only living Potter, you are the rightful representative of your forebearers, but your actions seem a bit...rash, especially given the *checkered* pasts of your new allies."

"I've of course taken that into account," Harry replied evenly. "The Dark purebloods were surprisingly willing to accept me as one of their own. They expressed interest. I had to follow-up."

Again, a nod. Susan seemed reluctant to pass judgment, a change from her initial approach. It would be interesting to see if things stayed that way should the conversation become a touch more...heated. Harry gave it a sharp nudge in that direction. "You *would* think that the Light families would be a bit more welcoming, would you not? After all, they owe me a great deal for defeating Voldemort fourteen years ago. I'd also have expected a family that suffered great losses to his Death Eaters, such as your own, to take note of my burgeoning power before a noted rival like Aiden. I *certainly* expected them to respond to the signs that I was aligning myself with the Dark."

Susan didn't immediately respond, but when she did, he wasn't disappointed. "Perhaps you give yourself too much credit, Potter. My family has not survived this long by rushing to hop on every bandwagon that randomly pops up without proper consideration. I would say that the odds of winning the allegiance of my family, and our allies, seriously suffered because you were too impatient to wait for us to make a decision." Her tone, though polite, was nonetheless scathing.

Harry smiled. "Do you think me so daft, Susan? Do you really believe I'd expect the Light families to fall all over themselves after I've demonstrated nothing but a peculiar ability to survive in life-threatening circumstances?"

Susan grimaced. "I walked right into your trap, didn't I?"

Harry nodded. "You did. It's nice to know how you *really* feel, regardless."

Susan stopped. "Potter, if I agree to be honest, can I expect the same from you? I realize that Slytherins might enjoy these verbal jousting matches, but I have neither the time nor the patience for such dalliances."

"Very well," Harry said. He began walking, and Susan quickly joined him. "What can I do to open up dialogue with the Light families?"

"You can start by annulling you alliance with the Burke twins. It made you look like a foolish, reckless, child with far more power and ambition than you had earned," Susan replied.

"I can't do that, and you know it," Harry said. "Annulling an alliance without just cause is a serious breach of honor, depending on the circumstances, one worse than betraying an ally."

"The Burkes are psychopaths, murderers. They may have been involved in the death of my family. What honor have they to begin with?"

"That's irrelevant," Harry argued. "The Dark purebloods are reluctant to side with me to begin with, and many have pasts that most normal people wouldn't be proud of. Why would they possibly even consider sticking out their necks and offering an alliance if they know I might simply abandon them and leave them in a worse position than they started of in?"

"Well, maybe you have to make a choice. Do you want the Dark, or do you want the Light?"

"What if I want both?"

"What if that isn't possible? Which side would you choose, Potter? Your natural allies, or a collection of criminals and back-stabbers?"

"Do you *really* want me to answer that question?" Harry asked her.

She nodded.

"I choose the Dark."

"*What?!*"

"I choose the Dark."

"I *heard* you, Potter, though I was sure I must have gone mad. In Merlin's name, why?"

Again, Harry stopped. "Because they are better fighters. Because they are stronger, more powerful, and most importantly, more willing to *wield* that power. What they don't have in numbers, they make up for in skill."

"Their *skill*, Potter, lies in murder, treachery, and deceit. You want *that* behind you?"

"I'm fighting a *war*, Susan. What else do I need more than witches and wizards that are good at killing people?"

"You need people you can *trust*."

Harry met her eyes. "I see no reason to trust the Light families anymore than the Dark. They've ignored me, ignored the threat to their very existence, ignored the blatant incompetence of Fudge's Ministry. Do you know what they look like, Susan? *Cowards*. Spineless, gutless, impotent, *cowards*."

Susan's eyes flashed with rage. "How *dare* you? You know *nothing*, Potter. You're as bad as they say, as *Dark* as they say. If you are really our best hope, then we truly are doomed."

"You believe that? That I'm your best hope?"

"You seem to."

"You didn't answer my question."

"And I don't *have* to, Potter," she spat. "I don't have to tell you anything." Harry noticed her right hand was buried in her robes, likely clasping her wand.

"We agreed to tell the *truth*, Susan."

"You haven't *earned* the truth, Potter." Again she refused to use his first name.

"I see that I was wrong to think that Amelia might be a better leader than Fudge, at least if her *niece* is any indication. How you two are even *related* to Edgar and Christopher I'll never understand!" His anger and frustration seeped into his words, more than he'd intended, and his voice became a malevolent hiss.

Susan howled with rage, whipping her wand out and casting a vicious Striking Hex. It was wildly aimed, and Harry didn't even flinch as it whipped past his right ear. She raised her wand again, but Harry lunged forward, reaching out to seize her wand arm. He applied pressure to her wrist, bending it back toward her forehead, and her wand tumbled from her grasp, a trick he'd learned from Tonks. She dropped to the ground and scrambled for it, but by the time she had it in her hand, Harry was standing over her, wand trained on her forehead. "Go ahead, Potter. I see I was a fool to trust you. I was stupid to believe you could be any better than the rest of the Slytherins," she spat, sounding almost resigned. "Go ahead. Hit me while I'm down."

Harry laughed at the absurdity of it all. He gestured wildly in the air. "Look at us, Susan! Look at what this has come to! A simple conversation has come to *this*!" he shouted incredulously. Her eyes were narrowed with guarded suspicion. Harry had had enough of it. "Get up. I'm not going to hurt you."

"Then get your wand off me," she demanded, not moving.

"Not until I'm sure you won't attack."

"I'm not going to *attack*, Potter," Susan replied harshly, rising and brushing the dirt from her knees. "Put the wand away." Harry did, and Susan reciprocated. She took several deep, calming breaths. "This conversation is over. Consider my letter null and void. What friends you had in Hufflepuff, you've now lost." She turned to leave.

Desperation clawed at Harry, and he let his pride take a fall.

"Susan!"

She stopped, slowly turning around. Her cheeks were still flushed, more from exertion than embarrassment. "What?"

"Come back. Let's talk this over. I didn't...I didn't mean for things to escalate so quickly."

"You deliberately antagonized me, Potter. You insulted my family, my allegiance, and me personally. What part of that was an accident?"

"Most of it. I...I took the wrong approach. I shouldn't have insulted you. I was trying to make a point, and I got carried away." He grimaced. "I'm sorry, Susan. I'm sorry for what I said, and what I did. I'm sorry for betraying your trust, and for disappointing you."

Susan didn't come any closer, but she seemed to consider his words. "You are apologizing."

"Surprising, isn't it?" Harry said, his voice a bit lifeless.

"Perhaps not," Susan said. She took a few steps in his direction. "Potter, what do you want from me? I am not my aunt. And I assure you, she would respond no better to such provocation than I did."

"I believe that," Harry said. "I want you to hear me out. Do what you will when I'm finished, but I need you to listen."

Susan waited a moment, then spoke. "I'll grant you that request. Go on."

Harry took a deep breath, let it out slowly. He advanced in her direction, but she didn't back away. That was a good sign, at least.

He wanted to talk to her face to face. He stopped about a meter from where she was standing, affording her a measure of personal space. "You read the letter that I sent you. You understand what I'm trying to do, and the obstacles that stand in my way, do you not?"

"I thought that I did," Susan admitted. "Now it sounds like you are trying to fight this war by yourself, and just expect everyone else to jump to fight with you because they have to take a side, and they won't side with You-Know-Who."

"Than I'm afraid you've misunderstood my intentions, Susan. I *can't* win this war on my own. I *need* help. I need the Light families. They aren't enough Dark families that will follow me to give me a chance against Voldemort's armies. Your family could be the first. You could set an example."

"An example of what, exactly?"

"Of courage," Harry answered. "Of urgency."

"What about Dumbledore?"

Harry sighed. This wasn't going to be easy. "We're on the same side, Susan. Dumbledore has become...a mentor, for the lack of a better term. We don't always see eye to eye, but we're working together. He's tried to rein me in at times, given me freedom to make my own choices, fight my own battles, make and learn from my own mistakes at others. I joined the Order of the Phoenix this summer. Right now, I'm a part of Dumbledore's forces."

"But that will change?"

"It will. I know it. He knows it. This isn't *his* war. It's...well, it's..."

"*Your* war?"

"Yes."

Susan stared at him for a moment. "I withdraw my earlier statement. My friends and I are with you. For *now*. But we'll be watching,

Potter...what of the Muggleborns and half-bloods? What role are they to play? You've spoken only of purebloods so far."

"I cannot promise change, Susan," Harry told her. "But I think that it is obvious to any that choose to see it that the system is broken, possibly beyond repair. When this is all over, if I live to see it, I promise to use what power I have to make things easier for Muggleborns, and to rid the Ministry of its institutionalized prejudice. I haven't offered the Dark purebloods anything besides a chance to survive this conflict. I will do what I can, but my primary goal remains winning this war. Nothing can be done until then. When societies are threatened, they become more conservative, more protective of old ways and traditions, not less. A Ministry under siege will not respond well to demands for change. And I cannot risk alienating my allies, not until this war is won."

Susan nodded. "Very well. I must ask, however: what if a family, Light or Dark, told you that they would join you, that they would fight for you, that they would be willing to take a Killing Curse for you...on the condition that you agreed to support proposed legislation that would force Muggleborns to register, and tighten the reigns on witches and wizards of Muggle parentage inside and outside of Hogwarts? What would you do?"

"I would try to negotiate with them."

"And if they could not be swayed?"

Harry looked hard into her eyes, letting her see his honesty. "Then I would tell them that I could not accept such terms, and that I would not support any measures to institutionalize bigotry, intolerance, and discrimination. If they asked me to do anything of the sort involving Goblins, I would likewise refuse. Too long we have treated them as savages, as uncultured beasts to be used for our benefit. It is time that we treat them as equals. They are intelligent, honorable creatures capable of wielding magic, even if it exists in a form that is unfamiliar to us."

"For one who claims to be a pragmatist, you certainly have far-reaching goals, Harry."

"All of them are contingent upon winning the war, and surviving to celebrate that victory. I will not attempt to change anything until the wizarding world is safe from Voldemort and his armies."

Susan considered that. "Very well. I will pass that on to my aunt. I cannot speak for her, and since I am not of age I cannot speak for my family, but for what it's worth, I believe that I made the right choice. That does not mean I won't be wary of your ambitions, and your Dark tendencies. But for now, I believe you have the right intentions."

"I appreciate your support, Susan, and I value your friendship."

"I'm glad," she said. "It's getting dark."

Indeed it was. During their at-times heated discussion, the sun had all but vanished below the Scottish hills. The temperature had dropped, though Harry hadn't really noticed until now.

Harry's head was pounding.

He'd already been feeling overwhelmed, and the events of this day had only made things worse. Daphne's crisis of confidence, his conversation - well, it was better described as a *confrontation* - with Susan, in which he'd made a whole load of promises that he hadn't even been sure he was willing to make until they'd already left his mouth. And now he was bound to them.

He'd avoided Ginny when she'd met him in the Entrance Hall, brushing past her with scarcely a thought. He'd avoided Blaise when his friend had tried to interrogate him in the Common Room, then knocked repeatedly on his locked curtains after Harry had barricaded himself inside his bed and attempted to do his homework. He'd given that up as a bad job, lying back on his bed and attempting to sleep. That hadn't come either.

He'd needed to get *out*.

He had silently slipped out of the Common Room with his invisibility cloak, and begun wandering the halls. He'd already avoided Filch once. He wasn't really that concerned with the cantankerous old

caretaker; the man was a miserable human being, but he was essentially harmless and easily deceived. Harry had considered going to Daphne, but decided that he didn't really want to discuss all of these things with her at the moment...especially because a number of the things that were troubling him *concerned* her.

He moved into another seemingly deserted corridor, walking past a windowsill, right past...

What?

Her turned back and stared, eyes widening. Then he shook his head. "I really shouldn't be *that* surprised, should I?"

"I've always been told I'm full of surprises, so I think it's reasonable to expect you to become accustomed to that fact."

"If only it were that easy."

"Is it so difficult?"

"Must you be this way?"

"Of course, Harry Potter. How else would I get your attention?"

"A letter, perhaps? My name spelled in fire in the middle of the Entrance Hall?"

Luna Lovegood grinned crookedly. "I might try that one next time."

"I was joking."

"I wasn't."

Luna sat on the ledge of a window, feet dangling over the edge. Her expression was that of bemused curiosity, her wand tucked casually behind her left ear. She wore an odd necklace of red and green beads, arranged in what seemed to be a random order. Harry doubted that was really the case; it was Luna, after all. She was still wearing her Ravenclaw robes, with the House badge removed. "I never said I thought you were," Harry pointed out.

"True," Luna said. She brought up an odd silver trinket, peering closely at it as she turned it over in her hands. "Do you know what this is?" she asked, offering it to him.

Harry took it. The object was palm sized, shaped like a cross with rounded points. The metal, which appeared to actually be silver, was pitted in certain areas, along with a few seemingly random cross-hatches along the arms. He flipped it over. The back was completely flawless, except for a roughly-etched pentagram at the exact center. He'd never seen anything like it. He couldn't even be sure it was magical. "I haven't the slightest clue," he admitted.

"That's unfortunate," Luna said. "I bought it at a little shop in Scotland, on the Isle of Skye, just outside of Portree. A very nice place, really. It just caught my attention, sitting disused on the shelf like that, gathering dust...that's a curious expression, really. Does an object left untouched actually *attract* dust to itself?"

"I think it's figure of speech, one of many that imparts living qualities to inanimate objects," Harry said, offering an explanation that would make Hermione proud.

"You sound like Hermione." Harry allowed himself a small smile.

"She's my best friend; I suppose it would have to wear off sooner or later," Harry said.

Luna shrugged, apparently uninterested. Harry looked closer at the cross, searching for minute details he might have missed. For the first time, he noticed the small symbols carved onto the small flat edge of the cross, some of them continuing on to the rounded edges. He couldn't make out anything that he recognized. "Was the storekeeper a Muggle?"

"Possibly."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Possibly? Most witches or wizards could tell the difference, and you are far more capable than the average witch or wizard."

"Perhaps I wasn't paying attention," Luna suggested. There was not a trace of sarcasm in her voice. Not that there ever was, of course.

"It is magical?" Harry asked.

Luna shrugged. "It might be. It's not like anything I've ever seen before, and I've seen many things. I thought you might like to keep it. Consider it a late birthday gift."

Harry frowned at that. "You already gave me a birthday gift. That odd yellow crystal."

"It's alive, you know," Luna said in a whisper. "It's not just a rock."

"I haven't had much time to examine it, honestly. I'll take that under advisement," Harry replied, deadpan. On second thought, he really shouldn't dismiss *anything* Luna said. It was *Luna*. Something occurred to him. As long as they'd been here, talking at a normal volume... "You've concealed us, haven't you?"

Luna smiled, nodding. She looked past him, as if looking beyond the reality Harry at least thought they currently occupied. "Mr. Filch has walked by three or four times. Mrs. Norris keeps sniffing the air. It smells like tuna."

Harry wasn't sure how to respond to *that*, so he said nothing. "Why are you here, Luna?"

"I needed some fresh air. It gets rather stuffy up there. All the brains working hard produce a lot of hot air."

Harry suppressed a snort. "I suppose I'm here for the same reason. I can't sleep. I needed to take a walk, sort through some things."

Luna eyed him curiously. Harry let his defenses lapse, essentially giving her permission to look into his mind. He trusted her, somehow, in a way he trusted no one else. Her at-time brutal honesty betrayed a complete lack of any kind of agenda. Luna merely *existed* in this world; she sought nothing more or less to live in and study the world around her, unnoticed, unseen.

"You worry too much. And you worry too little."

Harry cocked an eyebrow. "Care to elaborate?"

"They will come, you know. It's inevitable. You and he might be the only ones that really believe it, but Dumbledore is not going to survive this war. It isn't his to fight. It's yours," Luna said, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. "He loves you, you know. More than he's loved anyone in a long, long time."

"Does he know that you poke around in his mind?" Harry asked.

Luna surprised him by giggling. "Oh yes. He was a bit shocked the first time, and then he started telling me jokes. He leaves things for me. Thoughts, memories, amusing things that others have said. Right at the front of his mind, where I'll be sure to see them." Her expression became more serious. She shifted a bit on the ledge, and patted the empty spot next to her. "Come sit next to me, Harry."

Seeing no point in arguing, Harry did as she asked. Luna cocked her head up toward his face. "You don't want to believe me. Why?"

"Because I don't want to become overconfident," Harry explained. "I can't take anything for granted, not with the stakes what they are. I made that mistake with Susan. I thought I could manipulate her. Instead I nearly destroyed the fragile bridge I'd just begun to build."

Luna nodded. "I'm becoming more powerful, you know. I can do things with ease that I used to have difficulty doing, or could not do at all."

"I've noticed."

"Does it bother you?"

"Not really."

"Why? It would bother most normal people, after all. As silly as that is..."

"Well," Harry said, struggling to explain it. "You're *Luna*."

She looked away. When she turned back, the enigmatic Ravenclaw had tears in her eyes. "I'm sorry," Harry said quickly. "I didn't mean..."

Luna leaned over and wrapped her arms around him. Stunned, he didn't respond at first. "That's the nicest thing that anyone has ever said to me," she said in a voice choked with emotion. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Harry managed, still a little uncertain. Luna's behavior was hard to figure at the best of times, but right now it was utterly incomprehensible.

Luna looked back to him. "You're a good person, Harry. But you have to be careful. There's a Darkness within you that's hidden, even to me. I doubt you can see it. But sometimes it pokes its head out. It frightens me."

"I don't understand," Harry said. As far as he knew, Voldemort's stain has been erased from his magic. The last time it had come out, it had been gray, reflecting his indecision on the path he should chose to follow. To be sure, he was leaning toward the Dark, but that was a far cry from being a full-blown Dark wizard. Even then, what Luna was saying didn't make sense.

"You will," she said. There was a hint of sadness in her voice. "I'm afraid that we all will by the end."

And with that she was gone. She'd good as melted into thin air. Harry's thoughts were racing faster now, but strangely, he felt exhausted. Hardly relaxed, but tired nonetheless. He decided to head back to his dormitory. He was asleep as soon as he hit the pillow.

Harry had walked into an inferno.

Around him was a hellish landscape. Jets of molten rock blasted out of the charred and rocky ground. In the distance, lightning crackled and thunder roared, striking dark and foreboding craggy peaks, sending small boulders tumbling down into pools of lava, landing with splashes in the small lakes of molten rock. The ground under his feet hissed and spewed steam into the air, yet he felt nothing. He looked around, confused and bewildered. He was wearing his Hogwarts

robes, which looked as pristine as if he'd just taken them out of his trunk. But then where...

A massive explosion lit the night as the top of one of the mountains was blown skyward, blasting brilliant flames into the night, chunks of molten rock hurled upwards, before crashing to the ground. So far as he could tell, he was the only living being in this desolate, damned place. And if the chaos and violence continued at this rate, he might not be around much longer, either. He tried to move, but found himself rooted to the spot. His fear grew. He felt a presence. Something both familiar and terribly alien.

Then, out of the smoke and fire, a lone figure strode toward him. About his height, concealed by a thick black hooded cloak, its face was completely hidden to Harry's eyes. The nightmarish apparition stopped, and Harry noticed that its booted feet floated centimeters above the ground. He still could not tell if it was male or female...or something else altogether.

"Who are you?" Harry demanded at last. He had to yell to be heard over the cacophony of destruction all around him.

"That is an interesting question. But for now, call me Kalas," the figure responded. Its voice was deep and gravely.

"What is this place?" Harry asked.

"My home," the figure responded. It met Harry's eyes for a moment, and Harry saw that the irises were a molten yellow and black. "This is where I came into being. This is where I remain. For now, at least."

"Why I am here?"

"Because I want you to be here," Kalas said.

"What do you want from me?" Harry asked.

"I want everything, Harry. But I am a bit more reasonable than that. I want you to know. I want you to understand."

"Understand what, exactly? You've told me that this is your home, but that doesn't exactly answer my question."

Kalas laughed. A brilliant bolt of lightning split the air, followed closely by a crackle of thunder that seemed to tear the air itself. "Oh, come now, Harry. Is it really that difficult? What is the last thing you remember?"

Harry thought for a moment. "I spoke with Luna. And then I went to bed."

Kalas nodded. "And there you remain."

"So this is a dream?" Harry asked.

"Of sorts," Kalas replied. "But it is more than just a nightmare, Harry. Far more than that."

Harry was growing steadily more irritated. And though he hid it well, he was also more than a little frightened. "Show yourself," he demanded.

Kalas cocked his head. "Are you sure you want me to do that, Harry?"

"I am."

Kalas laughed again. It was a terrible sound. "Very well."

The demonic figure brought a pair of tattooed hands back, and slowly pulled back the hood of his cloak.

Harry's eyes widened in horror and revulsion. "No..."

He was staring at himself. A perverted, twisted, demoniac incarnation, to be sure, but nonetheless...

Yellow eyes filled with hatred in the place of green. A face marred by scars and strange tattoos. But there was no mistaking it. "This is a trick, a lie, a deception. Voldemort..."

Kalas laughed even harder this time, and twins bolts of lightning streaked across the sky, striking a nearby mountain and blasting it to

pieces in a violent explosion. Chunks of rock fell all around Harry, and he struggled to shield himself as he was pelted with ash and bits of charred stone. "Voldemort," he said mockingly. "Always Voldemort. No, Harry. I am not a Dark Lord. Not yet, anyway. You gave birth to me, not Merope Gaunt. I am your creation. Your anger has made you stronger, yes. Without it you would not have survived your last encounter with your mortal enemy. But I feed upon it as well, Harry. I was not strong enough to speak to you before now. But you have empowered me. You have given me a body to walk this landscape, given me eyes to see, given me a mouth to speak."

Harry was unable to respond. Shocked, appalled by what Kalas was saying, he could not form words.

"It's alright, Harry. Calm down, boy. Go seek comfort in the arms of your precious Ginny. Seek answers from Dumbledore and Daphne. Seek friendship from Blaise. I'll be here, waiting. I am very patient. I've waited years for this day, Harry. I can wait a little longer."

"Stay away from them!" Harry yelled, finding his voice.

"Are you really so stupid?" Kalas asked. He snapped his fingers, and Ginny materialized next to him, hovering above a chasm. Her face betrayed no knowledge of the moral peril she faced. She smiled softly, and her mouth moved, although Harry could not hear what she was saying. "I can destroy her, Harry. I can destroy them all. I can destroy whatever I wish because you can. Kalas and Harry - these are just names we use to separate our identities. But the truth, the wonderful, inescapable truth, Harry, is that we are one. You cannot escape me. I cannot escape you. But in time, I will grow stronger. You will need me to survive the war, Harry. You are not strong enough, not ruthless enough. There is no room for compassion. War is death. War is suffering. War is Hell."

And with that, he snapped his fingers again. Ginny suddenly seemed to notice him and Kalas, and her eyes lit with anxious confusion. Then, a torrent of lava rushed upward, blasting out of the ground like a geyser. Ginny was enveloped by the fire, her eyes widening with fear at the last moment, her pleading gaze turning to Harry, but her shrieks of agony were short lived. Something stabbed deep into

Harry's heart, and he found it difficult to breathe. He knew it was just an illusion, a trick, meant to torture and weaken him. But that didn't really seem to matter at the moment.

"You bastard," Harry hissed.

Kalas smiled. "I'll see you again, Harry. You can count on that." He looked down toward Harry's feet.

Harry followed his gaze. The ground beneath him began to shift and crack. There was a horrific crunching sound, and the ground parted. Kalas laughed.

Harry fell.

Chapter 7: Hope and Memory

Harry shot bolt upright, panting as if he'd just run a marathon. His head pounded, and he unconsciously clasped a hand to his forehead, over his scar. It was at that moment he realized, that while he was experiencing a great deal of discomfort, none of it was caused by the thin lightning bolt mark and his shared connection with Lord Voldemort.

That frightened him.

Harry was at a loss to understand what he'd just experienced. He was tempted, *badly* tempted, to write it off as nothing more than one of the worst nightmares he'd ever suffered, but something told him that he was only fooling himself. Something else vehemently denied that *a creature* such as Kalas could really exist within him, a seething cauldron of hatred and ruthlessness that could transform him into the very thing he sought to destroy.

Harry lay back in his bed, staring upwards into the surrounding pitch-blackness. A cool draft seemed to pass through the dormitory, and he shivered, clutching the sweat-soaked bed sheets closer to his body. A terrible realization came to him. At that instant, with barely a minute of thought, he suddenly knew where Kalas had come from, and where he'd already had a deep and irreversible impact upon Harry's life.

Kalas hadn't been born of Tom Riddle's rotten magic. He'd been born when Harry had finally unleashed the raw power within him for the first time. He'd been born out of necessity, because his ruthlessness and sociopathic personality had been required to ensure Harry's survival.

He'd be born on that terrible night in Third Year, when Harry, Daphne, and Sirius had found themselves surrounded and overwhelmed by a swarm of Dementors. And when Harry had been driven into submission by the agony of reliving his horrifying past, *Kalas* had risen to take his place. *Kalas* had ripped apart Daphne's barriers, shredding them like paper and allowing his magical core to explode outward with tremendous power, obliterating Dementors by the dozens. *Kalas* had saved his *life*, and the lives of Daphne and Sirius.

Harry hadn't been strong enough at the time; he'd been too frightened by the dangers of his uncontrolled power, wary of another training accident such as the one that had befallen Tonks that past summer.

How do I know all of this? He demanded. *How can I know all of this?*

But the realizations kept coming, and he was in no position to stop them.

Harry remembered vividly the moments leading up to and just after he'd staged his last, desperate attack against Voldemort in the graveyard. He remembered the pain, the suffering, the fear, the hopelessness. It was the memory of those emotions, of that desperation - and the desire to never experience it again - that kept him training so hard during the summer. He remembered recovering his sense after being flung through the air, reaching out to touch Cedric's cold, dead forearm, desperately using the last of his magical reserves to summon the Tri-Wizard Cup to him to affect his escape.

But the key moment of that entire sequence remained a blur to him. At first, he'd thought he'd blocked it out; now he wasn't so sure. What he did remember was a fury, a hatred of Voldemort greater than anything he'd ever felt in his life. At that instant, he wanted nothing more than to wipe the stain of the Dark Lord from the earth, tearing his body apart and shattering his soul, even if it cost him his own life. Harry remembered that he hadn't been thinking of Voldemort's other victims, of the heinous crimes he'd committed over the years. At that moment, his fury had been drawn from his pain, and his alone. He'd wanted Voldemort to suffer as he did, and so, in a last-ditch attempt to accomplish that goal, he'd drawn his power in the most powerful Demolition Curse he'd ever seen, just as Voldemort had cast the Killing Curse. It was ironic, he supposed; Harry's curse would have killed just about everybody - including himself - in the immediate vicinity with terrifying violence, blasting their bodies to bloody fragments. Voldemort sought only to end Harry's life.

Harry didn't believe that made him as bad or worse than Voldemort, not in the least. Harry had acted out of uncontrolled emotion and was fighting for his life. Voldemort wanted to finish off a wounded animal

that he had already devoted time and energy to tormenting and torturing because it made him feel superior. He'd humiliated Harry, not giving him the option of a quick death. Such actions were far worse in Harry's eyes than his own casting of that Demolition Curse.

But Harry hadn't escaped unscathed. Kalas said that he fed off of Harry's negative emotions and use of Dark Magic, becoming stronger every time Harry lost control of his power. He didn't see a reason for a *creature* whose life was tied to Harry's to lie. For now, at least, Kalas needed Harry.

Am I right to separate the two of us like this? Is Kalas a part of me, or something separate?

He wanted to believe it was the latter. He had a terrible feeling that the truth lay closer to the former.

What can I do?

That was the question. He could tell his friends and mentors, he *should* tell his friends and mentors. But he didn't want to. He didn't want them to think that he'd failed, that he hadn't been able to handle the use of Dark Magic. He *needed* Dark Magic in a way that couldn't be put into words. It was essential for his success. He hadn't been given a choice when he'd absorbed Riddle's power, and its predilection for the Dark Arts. He couldn't tell Daphne. Not right now, not while her confidence and psyche was so fragile. He couldn't tell Dumbledore, not after the man had given him his confidence that he was too good and compassionate to fall as Voldemort had fallen. He couldn't tell Hermione; she'd have a heart attack, withdraw her support for his endeavors in favor of examining the evidence and fully studying the situation to better understand and deal with it. He simply didn't have time for it right now, and it seemed that Kalas was limited to speaking with Harry in his dreams for now. Somehow, he suspected that Kalas's *visits* would be few and far between, and considerably less malicious most of the time. He'd wanted to shock Harry, to force him to accept the truth. But he wouldn't risk depriving Harry of sleep, making him so anxious about his inner demon that he got himself killed...and Kalas with him. Kalas needed Harry alive. That was the clear, inescapable truth. And so far, he was only strong

enough to take action when Harry's regular personality had already been incapacitated. He needed to keep it that way. He needed to be more careful, to better control his emotions, or he risked losing it all. Still, he couldn't do this by himself.

But who to ask? Who can possibly understand this?

Luna came to mind, but something told Harry that she already knew. In fact, as he mentally reviewed the details of their last conversation, it transformed from a suspicion into a certainty. Luna definitely knew about Kalas, but having provoked a negative response the last time she'd messed with his mind, she'd waited for him to figure it out on his own.

That left, putting Neville and Blaise aside for obvious reasons, and Snape because, well...since his little foray into his Potions Master's past, he didn't exactly trust him...*Ginny.*

Really, I shouldn't have needed to come up with her through process of elimination, he told himself. She's my girlfriend, but beyond that she's a person that I trust. I'll need to be careful with this. But I can talk to her. I have to.

She's a Slytherin. She's a realist. And she doesn't doubt me as easily as the others. She'll come to understand, and she'll help. She's always been good with people. To top it all off, she deserves it. She'll never tell me what's troubling her if I don't do the same. She's stuck with me, and she cares about me. I owe her this.

Even with that decision, sleep did not come easily. Eventually, Harry's exhausted body overrode his racing mind, and he fell back into the abyss.

Later that week, Harry found himself in a situation that felt *right*, somehow...even if it had taken a freak accident for him to actually find himself in this place, at this moment, in this particular role.

The place was about two meters above the south end of the Quidditch Pitch. The moment was the Serpents' pre-season tryouts,

just after noon on the first Sunday of the term. The role was that of acting Quidditch Captain of the Slytherin House Team.

There really was no way to describe the bizarre series of events, set in motion by Ginny's mischievous twin brothers, that had led to the reigning Slytherin Captain, Adrian Pucey, to be laid-up in the Hospital Wing, unconscious, the victim of a somewhat vicious prank going rather terribly awry. Fred and George had most likely wished to humiliate Pucey. It was actually a bit of a tradition, Harry had learned from his girlfriend, to prank the Slytherin Captain at some point during the year, normally towards the end of the season, although they seemed to have moved up the timetable this time. There were rules involved, apparently, the biggest being that the prank couldn't knock the Slytherin Captain out for any actual Quidditch matches. Ginny told him they thought it was unsportsmanlike, a statement that made Harry smile at the irony.

Their intent had been to hang Pucey upside down from the ceiling of the Entrance Hall, spinning slowly in the air, transfigure his clothing into a Gryffindor banner, leaving him otherwise naked, silence him to prevent him from calling for help, and shave his widely-admired jet black hair, leaving only the shape on an "L" on the top of his head. Ridiculously complicated, grandiose in scale, demanding tremendous talent at casting and manipulating advanced charms, relying on pinpoint timing, and damaging to nothing but their target's ego, their was no question as to the prank's perpetrators. Everything had worked just about perfectly, including using the lure of an early-morning romance with an older Slytherin, communicated through a passionate and somewhat explicit letter left under Adrian's pillow. Well, *almost* everything. The first to come across Pucey had been Slytherin's starting Keeper, Tracey Davis, who had a reputation as always being the first to Breakfast. Predictably, she became aware of her Captain's plight, although she was unfortunately alerted by a glob of Pucey's spittle landing in her hair, which was just about the only way Pucey could have gotten her attention. She'd immediately attempted to remedy the situation by canceling the Levitation Charm, which had sent Pucey plummeting down toward the stairs. Fortunately, Snape, having just emerged from the dungeons, managed to slow Pucey's descent enough so that the boy merely

smacked his head on the stairs with enough force to knock him out, rather than break his neck.

Harry blew hard into his whistle; the high-pitched shrill catching the attention of the myriad of Slytherins flying around on brooms. Besides the team from his 3rd year, which was essentially intact, they had a number of walk-ons, at least a dozen, by his count. A number of them were younger students, including several 2nd years, and a few first years, led by the cold Lysetta Avery, who'd asked to participate, even though they weren't going to actually make the team. Harry was interested to see what competition this year's starters might face, and he'd also considered the possibility of a reserve team. Harry was almost certain to take over the Captaincy of the team in his Sixth Year; the only reason Pucey led it now was that Flint hadn't been all that fond of Harry and picked Adrian as his replacement more out of spite than anything else. Adrian had proven to be reasonably competent, a decent strategist, and a good leader, more than could have ever been said for Flint. He came from a very poor pureblood family, one with plenty of Muggle bloodlines, but both his parents were wizards born of wizards, and that's all that really mattered in Slytherin. "Alright, Chaser candidates, over here!" he called.

In a few seconds, half-dozen individuals were hovering around him. They included his girlfriend, Ginny, his rival, Draco Malfoy, Slytherin's starting Keeper, Tracey Davis, a lanky Second Year named Graham Pritchard, Trevor Warrington, the boy that Tracey had replaced, and a barrel-chested 6th year named Max Fielder. All of them were competing for two spots; Pucey wouldn't have taken himself off the team under any circumstances, and Harry didn't have the authority to do it for him. He also respected Adrian, not as a friend, but as a teammate who worked hard, even if he wasn't the most agreeable sort.

"What do you want us to do, Harry?" Ginny asked immediately. She gave no hint of their relationship; both of them understood that she'd have to earn her spot on the team; Harry couldn't give it to her for personal reasons. They wanted to make it clear to the others that they had as much of a shot as anyone else.

"We're going to run some drills," Harry replied. "First I want to judge your accuracy and ball-handling. You'll be given the Quaffle and five shots on goal. Davis," Harry said. Tracey looked up at him. "Since you were our Keeper two years ago, you'll be the Keeper for this drill. When it's your turn, Warrington will defend the hoops." Harry clapped his hands together. "Alright, let's get going. We've got a lot to do and I want to be finished by sundown."

Harry hovered near the goalposts. Hermione sat in the stands, holding a clipboard, quill in hand. She'd absorbed enough knowledge about Quidditch over the years to be of some help in this capacity, and Harry had told her exactly what to look for. He wanted to do this right, to make sure that he could justify his choices to Pucey when the boy actually woke up...whenever that was. He hadn't just suffered a fractured skull and concussion; his magical core had essentially shorted out from the collapse of the Twins' magic when Snape had attempted to cancel all of the spells simultaneously. He'd live, and there wasn't likely to be permanent damage, but Harry suspected that Fred and George would be spending a good deal of quality time with Argus Filch in the near future.

Harry watched intently as each prospective Chaser took their turn. He saw some things he liked, other things he didn't. He noted things such as Pritchard's exaggerated windup and slow release, Draco's tendency to "aim" his throws which practically telegraphed his intentions to the Keeper, Ginny's hesitation as she carefully considered which hoop she wanted to aim for, Fielder's lack of balance on his broom, which resulted in more than one poorly-aimed shot, Warrington's complete inability to maneuver, Tracey's lack of arm strength, and several other glaring flaws in technique or strategy. He also noted the terrific velocity on Ginny's throws, Draco's skilled broom-handling, Fielder's ability to deceive the Keeper, Pritchard's self-confidence despite being the youngest of the group, and...well, Harry was stretched to come up with positive observations when it came to Warrington. Tracey was excellent, her form almost flawless, except for an overly complex side-arm throwing motion that could be fixed. Harry held off judgment for now, although his lack of faith in Warrington's skills as a Keeper were only confirmed when he failed to block a single shot, moving too slowly to keep up with Tracey's well-aimed throws.

The day wore on. Slytherin didn't normally hold open competition for every spot, but Harry wanted to put the best team on the field that he could. Gryffindor, so he'd heard, was determined to dethrone the Serpents this year because they would soon lose their starting Beaters. They still hadn't found a Seeker. Ron had been little more than a stopgap after McLaggen's disastrous trial, but Ginny's youngest brother had apparently decided to try something else. Ravenclaw's team was young but enthusiastic. Hufflepuff probably wouldn't be a factor in the Quidditch Cup, still lacking leadership and experienced talent. Harry watched the over two dozen of his classmates display their skill (or lack of it). Finally, it came down to the Seeker competition. Harry flew over to where his classmates had gathered, some on the ground with brooms under their arms, others hovering just a bit above the pitch. "Alright, it's time for the Seeker trials. Anybody interested in challenging me step forward, please."

As Harry had anticipated, he got a lot of blank stares. Harry's success as a Seeker was almost unparalleled in team history. As much as Flint tried to avoid giving him his just due, anybody who'd watched any of his Quidditch matches knew exactly what they were up against. "Come on," Harry urged them. "I'll give you a fair shot. I'm not trying to embarrass any of you. Even if you don't..."

Ginny stepped forward, a hard, determined look in her eyes. "Anyone else?" he asked, somewhat taken aback by the intensity of her gaze.

Graham Pritchard also stepped forward. Tracey Davis followed a few seconds later. The half-blood girl was a good all-around Quidditch player, capable of playing just about any position except Beater with reasonable success.

Harry gestured for them to follow, and led the challengers to the other side of the pitch. "We'll line up here. We'll use a real Snitch. I'll release it, and we'll wait two minutes. Once that time is up, we'll all go looking for it. If someone beats me to it, we'll do another competition."

"Nervous about losing your spot, Potter?" Tracey asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I have to allow for random chance, Davis," Harry replied. "And considering my track record, I think it's fair that I make my replacement beat me twice before I relinquish my position."

The three were silent, which seemed to communicate acceptance, or at least resignation. Harry opened his palm, and the Golden Snitch shot into the distance. Magical wards kept it from leaving the perimeter of the stadium, which kept the action on the field of play.

Harry waited, checking his watch until two minutes had elapsed. All four of them were lined up, sitting on their brooms, ready to take off. Harry swung his arm down. "Go!" He kicked off the ground a split second after the others, but his Firebolt's superior acceleration quickly made up for it, and then some. All four Seekers began patrolling the field. Harry abruptly dove hard at the ground, weaving and bobbing. To his chagrin, no one bought it this time. They'd seen too many opposing Seekers plow into the ground over the last few years. Harry banked away, gaining altitude, searching for the Snitch. He saw Pritchard take off after something, but before Harry had even swung his broom around, Pritchard either lost sight of the Snitch or realized that he'd never seen it in the first place. Executing a long, slow turn to the right, Harry looked back to see Ginny shadowing him. Tracey and Pritchard seemed to be taking their chances. There were several more sightings and brief pursuits, but none of the others seemed able to keep their eye on the Snitch. Harry was no different, seeing a glint of gold more than once, but losing it, most recently when Davis had cut across his field of vision. With the light fading, Harry was going to have to call it off soon; it was impossible to find the Snitch in the dark, no matter how skilled a Seeker was.

As it was, he needn't have worried. Swooping around one last time, he spotted the Snitch no more than ten meters away. Five seconds later, and it was struggling to escape his closed fist. The others had already noticed what had happened, so Harry blowing his whistle was a tad redundant. Still, it created an element of finality. Harry flew to the ground, trying to appear as modest as he could manage. He gathered all of them together.

"Alright, so that's settled," he said. "Thank you all for coming and participating. I saw a lot of good things today, and I'll remember them

for the future even if I don't put you on the team this year. I've got a few decisions to make, and then I'll post my preliminary list tomorrow evening. It's possible that Adrian might veto some of my decisions, but I don't think it likely."

With that, the group broke apart, heading to the changing rooms in small groups. Tracey Davis remained. Harry stared at her. "Davis. You have a comment?"

"You're not going to give me a Chaser spot, are you?" she said, sounding quite confident she already knew the answer. "I'm the starting Keeper again."

"You'll find out when the others do," Harry replied quickly. "You did a good job out there, but I need to look at the whole picture."

"In other words, I'm still Keeper because I'm the only one at all qualified for the spot," Tracey replied curtly. "I guess I can live with that."

Harry didn't reply. Tracey gave him an exasperated look, slung her bag over her shoulder, and headed for the changing rooms.

Harry felt Ginny come up to stand beside him. "She's right, isn't she?" Ginny asked.

"Of course she is," Harry said. "Tracey's not the brightest student in the class, but she's never been accused of being stupid, either. And the reasons for my choice are the ones she guessed at."

"If it makes you feel any better, I agree with your choice. She'd made a good Chaser though. And probably a better Seeker than I would. Her vision and awareness of her surroundings is a lot better than mine."

"You didn't follow me when I tried that fake," Harry pointed out.

"Of course I didn't," Ginny replied. "How many times have I seen you arrange a meeting between Ron and the ground? Too many to count. How many times have I seen you actually catch the Snitch after that kind of dive? Never. I played the odds."

Harry chuckled. "I hadn't even thought of that last angle."

"You tend to chase the Snitch higher into the air. You also tend to change altitude constantly, so you can adjust either way if you catch sight of it. I'm not completely blinded by your good looks when I'm watching you flying, Harry," Ginny replied, grinning impishly.

Harry smiled back at her. "We should go back inside. I see Hermione left."

"I sent her back," Ginny said, her smile fading. "And we're not going back inside. Not yet. We're going for a walk."

Harry tried not to let his surprise show. "Can I at least put away my broom first?"

Ginny nodded. "Meet me out here in twenty minutes, changed and ready to go."

"Yes ma'am."

After changing and quickly showering, Harry rejoined Ginny at the center of the pitch. She wore a jumper and jeans now, and her still-damp hair clung to the back of her neck. Harry, who'd never really developed much of a fondness for Muggle clothing, wore dark blue robes over a jumper of his own. "Where are we going?"

"I'm not sure, yet," Ginny replied, sounding unconcerned. "Come on." They linked hands and set off down one of the paths. There was an awkward silence for a time, as both of them considered what to say. Harry was just about to ask that they stop so that he could tell her about his dreams, but Ginny beat him to it. They had reached an old tree, overlooking the lake. They'd been walking for about ten minutes, without a word being spoken between them.

Ginny slowed her pace, and Harry quickly did the same. She lightly pulled him over the tree, and sat down, leaning her back against it. Harry took a seat beside her, and Ginny shifted, laying her head on his shoulder. Still looking away from him, she said, "Harry, what's wrong? Something's bothering you, and you haven't said anything about it to anyone."

Harry tried to find his voice. "About that...Ginny, you have to understand..."

She lifted her head from his shoulder, turning her body so that she could look directly into his eyes. "Harry, I don't want excuses. I don't need them. This isn't the first time you've hidden something from me. But whatever it is seems to be really bothering you, and I can't help but be concerned. You can tell me *anything*, Harry. You know that, right?"

"Of course," Harry replied quickly. "I...I had this dream a few nights ago. Only I'm not sure it was just a dream. Okay, I'm *certain* it wasn't just a bad dream."

"Was it V-voldemort?" Ginny asked, a slight stutter in her voice. Like most wizarding children, she'd been taught never to speak the name of the Dark Lord, a habit she'd worked to change over the years.

"No," Harry replied. "No, it wasn't."

Ginny frowned. "Then, what..."

Harry took a deep breath. "I need you to just sit back and listen. I'll tell you about it, but I'd prefer you just let me talk about the whole thing before you ask any questions or pass any judgments. Can you do that for me?"

Ginny nodded, although her eyes betrayed a touch of trepidation. "Go on, then."

Harry nodded his thanks, and began describing his dream. At several moments, Ginny looked like she badly wanted to say something, but held back. When he finished, he was shaking, badly. His cheeks flamed with embarrassment, and he ducked his head. Ginny was having none of it, and wrapped him in a tight embrace, which helped to calm his body and mind. Eventually, when she felt it was no longer necessary, she let go. She stared at him for a long moment, saying nothing. "Well?" Harry asked.

Ginny took a deep breath. "I don't know. I don't understand what's going on. You've got to tell Dumbledore about this, Harry, he's the only one that can help you..."

"No!" Harry shouted. Ginny jerked back in surprise.

Realizing his mistake, Harry clumsily reached out and grabbed her hand. "I'm sorry," he said quickly. "You've got to understand, Ginny, I *can't* tell Dumbledore. Not yet."

"But why?" she persisted. "Give me a reason and I'll at least understand where you are coming from."

"Dumbledore gave me what was essentially a vote of confidence this summer. He told me that because of my compassion and capacity to love, if I stayed true to the Light, or at least the cause of defeating Voldemort, I couldn't fall as he did. He told me that despite my growing knowledge of the Dark Arts, and my desire to learn more and become more powerful, he trusted my integrity and my intentions. That kind of endorsement is *not* given lightly, Ginny. What would he say if he knew I had this...this *thing* inside me, this part of me that represents everything that I fear I might become? That I was wrong to believe I had resisted the call of the Dark, the call to dominate, the call to embrace my anger and hatred? How could he trust me to continue along the path I have chosen?"

Ginny's face was white, but she nodded tightly. "You're right," she said quietly. At the incredulous expression on his face and subsequent protest, she quickly silenced him by placing a finger on his lips. "I'm not saying that because I don't want to argue this with you, Harry. I can't...I know what Dumbledore's approval means to you, means to the cause itself. It isn't just about your self-esteem, it's about your reputation as a person that the Light families would follow and serve."

Harry nodded. "I don't know what to do, Ginny. I'm scared. I'm not afraid to admit it. Not to you. I don't want to know Kalas, to understand Kalas, because the only way to do so might be to *embracethat* part of me, and that is a choice I simply cannot make. I can't take that risk."

Ginny grasped both of his shoulders. "Harry, I...I..." But she couldn't say it. *I love you* was something that many couples exchanged, even young ones that didn't really mean it because they couldn't possibly know what love was. But they had already decided that they couldn't treat this as just a normal teenage relationship. Not with everything that was on the line.

Harry smiled fondly at her. "I know, Ginny. I know, and I feel the same way. *Exactly* the same way." He leaned over and kissed her gently on the lips. She wrapped her arms around him and he did the same to her. "Thank you for understanding, for being here for me," he whispered into her ear.

"*I know* you, Harry. I know you better than I know anyone. And this *Kalas* isn't you. He isn't the Harry Potter that I've grown to know and...care so bloody much about," Ginny replied, a fiery edge to her voice. "We'll keep this a secret for now. Just...just be careful. Fight your negative emotions. Control them; don't let them control you. Don't let him win."

"I won't, Ginny," Harry said. "I promise, I won't let him hurt you, or anyone that I care about. I'd die first, and him with me."

"It won't come to that," she said firmly. "You're stronger than he is. You're one of the strongest people I've ever met. You won't give in."

They held each other for some time. As the sun slipped beneath the horizon, they laid back, pressing against each other for warmth as well as for comfort. Harry gently stroked his girlfriend's downy hair, letting the feeling of his fingers sliding through it distract him from everything that was on his mind. The stars came out, and Ginny found herself telling Harry some of the stories that her oldest brother Bill had once told her about the constellations. Harry listened politely, but his attention wasn't as much focused on her words as it was her presence, lying beside him in the moonlight. They remained there for hours, eventually requiring Warming Charms to prevent themselves from freezing. Finally, both of them felt that they'd done all they could, and the rose as one to head back for the castle. It was as relaxed as Harry had felt in ages. He vowed to spend more time with Ginny. It wasn't just that she deserved it, though there was no doubt she did. It

was also that he'd very badly missed the constant interaction they'd enjoyed in the time leading up to the Third Task the previous term.

Harry tried very hard to resist the urge to punch Blaise in the face, as he continued to whine about the poor mark he'd received on his terribly botched potion. To be fair, his criticisms of Snape as a poor teacher, who gave them instructions but nothing in the way of useful advice, an understanding of the context or importance of the potions they brewed, or (Merlin forbid) *positive reinforcement*, were as deserved as they were accurate. But this was the fifth year he'd taught them, and Harry had hoped that Blaise might have gotten over the fact that Snape was a miserable excuse for a human being by now. No such luck, unfortunately.

Blaise trailed behind him as he stared straight ahead, mentally determining his homework schedule. "...The git's downright malicious," Blaise complained. "I mean, he practically *sabotaged* your potions before he figured out you weren't just a clone of your father that had the gall to get himself Sorted into Slytherin. He terrorizes Neville, I've never learned anything useful from him, and he's destroyed any ambition I might have had to continue my studies in Potions. I'm half considering bombing my O.W.L. so I don't have to put up with him on an everyday basis anymore."

Harry finally stopped, his patience at the breaking point. "Blaise," he said in a disinterested voice that he used when he was irritated. "May I remind you that you did *nothing* to help me when Snape was sabotaging our potions? And since when have you *ever* cared about Neville? In addition, you *might* learn something useful from him if you listened to what he wrote when he graded your essays instead of just complaining about your marks and disregarding his comments out of spite. I've never heard you admit the slightest interest in Potions, in or out of Snape's class, and at the rate you are going, you won't need to make an *effort* to bomb your O.W.L."

Blaise considered his words. "First, Harry, I apologized for not acting in First and Second Years. More to the point, you *accepted* my apology. Second, I've cared about Neville since I've gotten to know him as a friend, and wish I'd taken the effort earlier instead of just

laughing at his clumsiness. Third, I've shown you my essays, and you've seen that Snape writes far more snide comments about my incompetence and lack of aptitude for his subject than useful corrections, and that he's refused to meet with me because he doesn't like me. And fourth, I take pride in doing well in school, Harry, and I'm legitimately concerned that if Snape doesn't make any effort to teach us anything I might not make it into N.E.W.T. Potions, something that would be a great personal disappointment as well as a disappointment to my family."

Harry stared back at him. Blaise had managed to defuse each and every one of his arguments, and done so while maintaining his composure and using logic instead of subjective anecdotal examples. "Alright, then, I'm sorry. And I won't say I don't disagree with you. But complaining about it won't change anything. Snape's under Dumbledore's protection because of what he did for the Order during and after the war. His aid was vital in rounding up a lot of the Death Eaters still at large, and locating and freezing Voldemort's assets. He's a bastard, but he's an accomplished bastard. He's also one of the best Potions Masters of the last century. He's not just some teacher; he's a talented, experienced, and brilliant individual, a pioneer in his field. So considering that, as well as the fact that there is nothing we can do, I've chosen to put up with him and see if I can't exploit the situation to my benefit. If that means forgetting the hell he put me through for two years than so be it."

Blaise shook his head. "I'll never understand how you do that."

"I don't get it either," Harry admitted. "I just do it because I don't think I have any real choice."

"But then why..?" Harry cut him off. "What is it?"

"Listen," Harry whispered. They could hear arguing up the corridor. The voices sounded angry, but were high-pitched and juvenile. Harry didn't know what made him run around the corner, wand drawn, but he soon found out.

Peter Lowry, the shy, frightened-looking boy from the Sorting Ceremony, was backed up against a wall, looking like he might wet himself. Surrounding him were four younger Slytherins, including First

Years Lysetta Avery, Hazel Parkinson, Maximillian Yaxley, and a 4th year, Henry Harper. Avery and Harper had their wands drawn. Harry listened to what the sharp-tongued First Year was saying. "...How dare you even intrude upon our world, with a parentage like that!" she screeched. "Not only Muggles, but the religious sort! You know what they did to us, don't you? Your kind burned witches at the stake, and no matter what those history books'll tell you about Freezing Charms, many of our kind were murdered by fanatical scum like your ancestors."

"They didn't just burn us, either," Harper added in a sinister whisper. "They hung us, snapped our wands and then snapped our necks. Sometimes they beheaded us. Didn't always happen on the first try. There was also drowning. And you have the stones to get your puny arse sorted into Slytherin, you useless coward? You don't deserve to even be here."

Harry had heard enough. Anger surged through his veins, and ignoring Blaise's noises of protest, he stalked toward the little gathering, eyes blazing. "Leave him alone," he hissed.

Lysetta, a short girl with cold dark eyes leered at him. "None of your business, Potter. This little traitor here is just getting what he deserved."

"Just like your father, eh?" Harry asked, refusing to hold back even though his target was just eleven years old. "Bloody Death Eater got exactly what *he* deserved too. Harper," Harry said, freezing the older boy in his tracks. "What exactly are you doing here? Picking on a First Year because a Second Year's too much for you?"

"Never you mind, Potter," Harper growled.

"I mind. Now get before I hex the lot of you," Harry ordered. "Trust me, Snape likes me a lot more than he likes any of you. He'll believe my side of the story. Leave. Now." For emphasis, he spun his wand around in the air, tracing a flame around him in a wide arc. It had the intended effect, and Peter's would-be assailants fled. Harry watched them go, and then noticed Lowry trying to slip away, unnoticed. He almost succeeded. "Peter," Harry said quietly. "Come over here. I'm not going to hurt you."

The boy, scrawnier than most his age, and a bit short too, cautiously looked back at Harry, who had put away his wand and now stood in the middle of the corridor. "Peter," Harry said again. The name seemed odd on his tongue, probably a reflection of Harry's memories of the traitor that bore that same name. Harry took in the boy's appearance for the first time. His blue eyes were nearly hidden by the bangs of his unkempt brown hair, and Harry saw suspicion and fear in them. His robes were clearly second-hand, and his hair looked unwashed. "My name is Harry. I just want to help."

Peter's body relaxed a bit, though his face remained tensed, his eyes scanning the area around them like a pair of searchlights. "Peter," Harry said for the third time.

"I guess I should be thanking you," the boy said in a quiet voice. "They won't leave me alone." His accent was hard to discern, though Harry thought he might have lived in London at one point or another.

"You don't need to thank me," Harry told him. "I've been in your situation. I do what I can to prevent others from suffering as I did."

Peter didn't respond to that. Something about the eleven-year old, who, without the robes, resembled an alley rat more than anything else, was calling to him, to his magic. Harry really had no business providing comfort to a boy he didn't even know, but that wasn't going to stop him. If anything, his rabid curiosity wasn't going to let him allow this boy out of his sight before he figured out what was so enticing about him. Most would be repulsed, or indifferent.

If anything, his appearance just makes this whole thing more interesting.

"You're Muggleborn, aren't you?" Harry asked.

Peter nodded cautiously. "What's it to you?"

"I'm a half-blood, myself," Harry told him. "My mother was Muggleborn." There was something strange - and wonderful - about talking to someone that had absolutely no idea who he was, what he had done, and what he had to do. It was deeply refreshing.

Peter merely nodded. "Can I go now?" he asked, looking around the corner.

"If you'd like," Harry said. "I won't insist that you stay here. But I..."

"Goodbye, then," Peter said, and disappeared around the corner.

Harry sighed. His curiosity would have to wait, it seemed.

"Potter, what the bloody hell was *that* about?" Blaise demanded from behind him.

"I have absolutely no idea," Harry admitted. "But I'm going to find out."

"You're mental. Completely nutters."

"Keep telling yourself that, Blaise."

"Run this by me again," Hermione said. "You want my help with *what*, exactly?"

"I need you to talk to a Muggleborn boy I met."

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "And you are incapable of doing this without my help because..?"

"I think he might open up a bit more to you."

"Right," Hermione said, keeping a straight face. Ginny looked very puzzled off to his right, but didn't say anything. They were in their usual corner of the Library, where Hermione, Neville, and - somewhat surprisingly - Luna, had been doing homework. Or, more accurately, Hermione had been doing homework, and Luna had been - *let's face it, there's no other word for it* - flirting with Neville, who was extremely confused about the whole thing. Then again, Luna's interpretation of flirting was quite different from any other he'd seen, so it was hard to blame him. Blaise had followed Harry from the dungeons, not saying a word, but not needing to; he'd already made his opinion on the subject quite clear.

"Harry, I'm really not sure I follow," Ginny admitted.

"I need to know more about this boy," Harry insisted. "I don't know why, but there's something...*off* about him. No, that's not the right word," he said, shaking his head in frustration.

"That's good, because I'd be a tad alarmed if you started accosting every young boy that felt *off* to you and started demanding they tell you their life's story," Blaise said dryly.

"Is there something wrong with him? How did you meet him?" Hermione, at least, was making an effort to get on the same page as her best friend.

"Well, when I found him he was being bullied, but that's not..." He stopped. Looking back on it, the reason he'd gotten involved in the first place had been that Peter was being harassed by his schoolmates. He hadn't noticed the strange draw on his magic until after Avery, Harper, and the others had fled. "Okay, I suppose that's why I acted in the first place."

"What exactly did you do?" Ginny asked.

"Just scared off Avery's little sister, a few other First Years, and that bloody idiot Harper from your class," Harry said. "They were harassing him, attacking him for being of Muggle parentage. They were also making reference to some other element of his background, although I'm not sure what. I tried to get him to stick around, but he ran off as soon as I let him," Harry explained.

"Why did you try to get him to stick around?" Hermione asked.

"I just have this odd feeling about him," Harry said. "It's hard to put into words. But I need to know what's causing it, what makes him special."

Hermione looked thoughtful. "What else do you know about him?"

"Very little. He didn't look very good when I saw him. Clothing's worn; probably doesn't come from money, doesn't look like he's gotten much sleep lately, looks a tad malnourished."

"Let's see...who does that remind me of?" Hermione asked rhetorically.

Harry frowned. "Did I look *that* bad?"

"Worse," Hermione told him. "You looked half-dead most of the time." She looked down. "I'm sorry for not realizing what that meant earlier."

Harry waved his hand in a dismissive gesture. "We've been over this. You've got nothing to apologize for, and I won't have you feeling guilty about the whole thing. You learned your lesson, and you more than atoned for it during the rest of the year. Let it go."

Hermione nodded. "Alright. But you haven't. First Neville, now this..."

"Is there something wrong with wanting to help those who've been abandoned and left by the wayside for reasons beyond their control?" Harry argued hotly. "Maybe it isn't the most *Slytherin* thing to do, but..."

"I understand," Hermione said quietly. "We *all* understand. So, what exactly do you want me to do? Are we going to hunt him down or something?"

"No. I'll let him come to me. I just need you to be comfortable talking with him."

Ginny looked at him curiously. "Do you really think that will help? Do you have any intent of keeping up with him if he turns out not to be special after all?"

Harry glared at her. "That's not a fair question. And he *is* special. If I'm wrong, I'll keep an eye out for him, try to make things easier on him. I'm not out just to use him for my own benefit."

Ginny nodded. "Then I think it sounds like a good idea. I didn't mean to offend you, Harry. But that question needed to be answered."

"Well, it's been answered," Harry replied, a bit sharply.

"Alright, so we just wait?" Hermione asked. Harry nodded.

“We wait.”

The wand motion was exaggerated, throwing the spell off target and negating some of the initial power. The result was a very weak Stunning Spell, one that would probably have to hit you in the neck to have any chance of knocking you out. If you got hit on the leg, the worst you'd have to deal with was some temporary numbness. Stunners worked by overloading the nervous system and causing it to crash, plunging the target into unconsciousness. It affected the system for only a second, so it couldn't kill (well, it was said that you might be able to paralyze someone if you stuck your wand into the back of your target's neck and hit them right on the spinal cord, but even that was unconfirmed, and of little practical value). In any case, Dean Thomas's spell failed to meet even her lowered expectations.

“Thank you, Mr. Thomas,” she said politely. “You can go back to your seat now.”

They were practicing Stunning Spells, which was about the most harmless form of combat-suitable magic in existence. She was appalled by the fact that with the exception of Harry, Neville, and Hermione, who had done training on their own, and a few of the Slytherins that had no doubt received private tutoring, the class was incapable of performing this simple bit of magic. Four years of disrupted, inconsistent, and all-too-often *useless* Defense Against the Dark Arts classes had created a bunch of 5th years that knew barely a fraction of the defensive magic that the average student in her year knew by that point. They weren't prepared for the O.W.L.s, much less a fight with Death Eaters who wanted to kill them quickly and move on to their next victim.

She'd chosen the order of students randomly, and Harry was next. His effortless Stunner stuck the exact center of her target, and the magical power meter she'd cobbled together recorded the strongest blow yet. Parvati Patil came next, with an effort that just barely exceeded that of her Gryffindor classmate Thomas in power, and completely missed the target. She forced a sympathetic smile, and told the girl to sit down.

When it was over, she could not help but be disappointed. Taking Harry's words to heart, she'd attempted to make up for her overbearing first performance. As much as she wanted it to be different, these were innocent, naïve teenagers, not eager and skilled Auror cadets, as she'd instructed the previous year. There she'd been able to be open and honest, giving praise when it was deserved and harsh criticism when it was warranted. She was expected to do no less. Scrimgeour had made it clear to her that he'd accepted her help in training his Aurors with the utmost reluctance, and that he was terribly concerned by the utter lack of readiness within the ranks. Fudge had been cutting their budget for years, and it showed. The new Aurors were nothing compared to the brave men and women Daphne had fought with and commanded, many of whom hadn't survived to see the war's end. Her unit in particular had an appalling attrition rate, as Auror Enforcement Group #12 was often the first called upon when word of a Death Eater raid reached the Ministry. They'd found themselves in more than one ambush. They persevered, but there had been a terrible cost. *Emily. Deborah. Henry. Derek. Wendy. Kevin.*

Those were the names of the Aurors she had seen killed before her very eyes, during a series of brutal engagements in the summer of 1980, when Voldemort had begun striking openly at Wizarding communities. They'd never known when or where the enemy might strike, and they'd taken to sleeping in their battle armor, spending far more time at Auror Headquarters than at home. A few of them had been married and a few of their husbands, wives, and children had been killed over the years. There were others besides those six, but those were the ones that had been with her since the beginning. She had not been the only survivor of the original group. Alex Kingsbury had been crippled in the winter of 1980 and ended up moving to South America with his 2nd wife. She'd neither seen nor heard from him since. He hadn't been in good shape mentally. Two others had made it through from the unit's creation in 1978 to its dissolution in 1981. Their names had been Alice and Frank. And it wasn't exactly fair to count them as *survivors* given the fate that had befallen them after the fall of Voldemort.

Letting the memories of the past drift away, she addressed the class. "While some of you have made progress, and are to be commended

for that, more than a few of you did not meet my expectations for this exercise. But that is not really your fault, so don't let that get you down. With the exception of Professor Lupin, you've had very little in the way of competent instruction. We, the adults, have failed you in that regard. I intend to do what I can to remedy the errors of my predecessors. I warn you that I will expect a lot from each of you. I will insist that you pay your lessons your full attention, that you put time and thought into your nightly assignments, and that you come to me at once if you have questions or concerns. I will be in my office most evenings, and I'd welcome company."

There was a short silence, and then Hermione's hand shot into the air. No surprise there. "Miss Granger?"

"Professor Dressler," Hermione began, addressing her with the respect due her position, and not as the surrogate mother of her best friend. "I'd like to offer a suggestion."

Daphne nodded. She noticed Harry sitting up, his emerald eyes shifting to his friend, though his head didn't move. Increasingly of late, his movements, like his behavior, had become subtler, more restrained. Daphne knew Harry well, well enough to know what that meant. Something was bothering him, and until he could better understand whatever it was, he would remain cautious and contemplative. When Harry was anxious, he tried to make himself invisible to others, so that they failed to recognize and potentially exploit his moment of weakness. When he was confident and excited, he took risks, and showed all the daring and boisterousness of his Gryffindor father. It was in those rare moments and those moments alone when Daphne caught a glimpse of the spirit of James Potter which resided in his son's cunning and ambitious personality.

Spurred on, Hermione pressed forward. "I believe that if we're going to learn all of the spells and strategies that you feel we'll need to have a chance to...survive," she said, finally deciding on the proper word, "we ought to get in a bit of practice outside of class. We can't practice dueling on our own, obviously; it's against the rules. But if we created some sort of club, or extracurricular organization..."

The corners of Daphne's lips pulled up into a smile. Harry's eyes lit up like a pair of beacons. "A fine idea, Miss Granger. I do understand that you already have many demands on your time," she told the class, "but I would like you to tell me when you are free. The time we set aside will be used exclusively for practical work; we'll leave the textbook out of it. I also believe that if you have an opportunity to work exclusively on your spell casting outside of this classroom, we'll have more time to devote attention to preparing for the O.W.L.s, which a number of you have expressed concern about."

There was some murmuring among the students, which she tolerated. She waited patiently for the whispered conversation to subside, and then spoke. A few hands were raised.

"Mister Finnegan?"

"Professor, this sounds an awful lot like that dueling club Lockhart set up in Second Year."

"It might bear some similarities," Daphne admitted. "Hogwarts has a long and proud history of competitive, regulated dueling. It was discontinued, not for the first time, shortly before the war broke out in the late 70s. I don't intend to ask the Headmaster for his permission to re-found it, not after the events of last year." She was referring, of course, to the spectacular duel between her ward and Draco Malfoy, which was held against Dumbledore's strongest wishes. Literally minutes after Harry had emerged the victor, the Ministry had passed a law prohibiting any further duels between Hogwarts students, no matter what the circumstances. "This won't be a competition. It will be a learning experience. I don't want any of you to get hurt, and I want you to enjoy it. I won't turn you loose without instruction, I'll try to match you up with partners of similar ability and strength when dueling is involved, and I'll offer advice when I can. Miss Patil?"

"Will we receive marks based on our performance?"

"No," Daphne replied. "This will be an un-graded exercise, assuming I get the go-ahead from the Headmaster. It's meant to be for your benefit. I realize that the competitive nature of teenagers might make it difficult to do so, but I ask that you keep in mind that you all have plenty of room to improve, and early failures and successes are not

indicative of your ultimate potential. Some of you have more experience or private training than others.”

Theodore Nott lazily raised a hand. Daphne called on him.

“Will you be demonstrating any of the Dark Arts?” he asked.

Damn you, she silently cursed, caught off guard by the inquiry. Her brief pause just intensified the curiosity...and anxiety of her students. “I will not be teaching you anything classified by the Ministry as Dark Magic,” she said finally.

Nott gave her an innocent look of confusion. “But Professor,” he said politely, “you didn’t answer my question. I felt it went without saying that you wouldn’t be schooling us in the Dark Arts. But given your...reputation, should we be prepared to see spells used in the course of your demonstrations that we are not to attempt ourselves?”

“It is possible,” Daphne replied, fixing the Slytherin with a hard look. “However, our environment will not be a battlefield, and there will be no need to display the full extent of my repertoire. I am a former Auror, and licensed by the Ministry to use Dark magic in service to the Light,” she continued. Her cold stare dared Nott to bring up the fact that her license, issued over fifteen years ago, was probably expired, even if it had never been officially revoked.

He took the hint. “Thank you, Professor. I simply wished to know what to expect.”

“Of course,” Daphne replied, though she couldn’t help but let a chill into her voice. Nott worried her. The nephew of an incarcerated Death Eater couldn’t be anything but bad news.

The bell rang. Daphne assigned her class to read another excerpt from Moody’s book, and to give them times when their schedule might allow them to meet and practice their spell casting. She’d been hoping for such a suggestion for some time, ever since Harry had mentioned his desire to see all of his classmates receive some additional - and badly needed - training. Hermione had finally given her the opportunity she’d been hoping for. She didn’t want to appear too aggressive, too reckless. She’d made that mistake already, and

Harry's assessment of her first class, although somewhat gentle, had still awoken her to the fact that teaching students at Hogwarts required a very different approach than the one she'd used to instruct Tonks and the other Aurors the previous year.

Once they were all gone, even Harry, she gathered her notes and headed for the Staff Room. She felt a bout of dizziness coming on, along with a touch of nausea. She might have gone to Madam Pomfrey had she not already discovered that her condition was well beyond even the skills of Hogwarts' capable Matron to treat. There was nothing to be done, really. Her body was beginning to fail her, bit by bit, just like her mother's old friend had predicted. It was tolerable for now, but things could only get worse. She hoped only that Harry would not learn the truth before the end, that he would not be troubled by his inability to help her until it was far too late. Just as Melinda had said, she'd brought it upon herself. *You reap what you sow*, the woman had told her, aptly using a common Muggle expression to sum up her very magical plight.

I've probably got less than a year left at this point, she thought as she walked down the corridor. If Melinda was right - and she hadn't been mistaken yet - she might not see Harry 16th birthday. It saddened her, yet at the same time she was relieved. She often feared she'd become a crutch that Harry had gotten accustomed to resting his weight on. She'd already fought her war. Every mentor had to step aside sooner or later. She'd given Harry a pleasant childhood, done her best to help him through the trials of his Hogwarts years...with *erratic* results, to put it politely. More accurately: *I've fucked up royally. More than once.*

But despite it all, Harry was alive, strong of magic and character, surrounded by loyal friends and lies, and no longer ignorant of the path Destiny would have him walk. Despite all of the struggles, despite all of the pain, she could be content that she'd done the best she could. Her job wasn't over yet, but her role in this epic tale was coming to an end, faster than she might have wished. There was so much she wanted Harry to know, to understand. So many memories that she could not, try as she might, put into words that came close to doing them justice.

She had reached the Staff Room, and pushed open the door. It was empty, and she made her way over to a comfortable red armchair, sinking into the cushions. She saw that the House Elves had put out a fresh pot of tea, and she got up to pour herself a cup. Sitting down, she picked up the *Daily Prophet* that lay on the table in front of her, perusing the headlines. Nothing of real interest, not even an inane column by Skeeter. Daphne smiled with pride as she remembered the way Harry had manipulated the vindictive, sharp-tongued journalist, embarrassing Fudge and repairing his reputation at the same time. Fudge had made the monumental mistake of refusing to grant Skeeter an interview so that he could respond in kind to Harry's attacks, instead issuing a number of statements through the Ministry. The fact that he even responded to being called out by a teenager lent Harry additional credibility, and his unwillingness to grant a personal interview made even his most ardent supporters wonder if he didn't have something to hide.

The door swung open, and Snape swept into the room, black robes flapping behind him. His look of contempt and disdain only got fouler when he caught sight of Daphne. He stood there, glaring at her, as Minerva came in, walking over the tea tray and pouring herself a cup before she seemed to even notice them. Snape broke eye contact, and in so doing, abandoned the half-hearted, frustrated attempts to break Daphne's resilient mental shields. It was a little game they played, unbeknownst to everyone else, with the possible exception of Dumbledore, who would not have approved in any case.

What was certain, however, was that none of them knew the real story behind the mutual hatred between the Grey Maiden and Hogwarts' resident Potions Master.

"Good day," Minerva said to them. "How have your classes gone?"

"Just two students sent to the Hospital Wing, and three melted cauldrons," Snape replied offhandedly. "Hufflepuffs, of course. Minor injuries, I'm told." He seemed entirely unconcerned with the wellbeing of the students in question.

"I see," McGonagall said. "And you, Daphne?"

"Quite well so far," she replied, taking a sip of her tea. "Hermione Granger gave me an interesting idea I'd like to pursue further with the Headmaster."

"A very bright girl, she is," Professor Flitwick squeaked, as he joined them. "I can only hope that one of this year's batch of First Years turns out like her. She picked up the Levitation Charm faster than any witch or wizard not of pureblood birth I've ever seen."

"Yes, she has a phenomenal memory...and an utter lack of sense when it comes to Potions," Snape interjected, obviously irritated by the praise being piled on Hermione, whom he was not very fond, thinking her an arrogant know-it-all.

"And who would you say was the strongest student in *your* Fifth Year class?" McGonagall inquired with a touch of forced politeness.

"Elisha Moon, without question," Snape said. "She has the flair of a veteran Potions Mistress, and all of Granger's brains without the ego."

"Really?" Flitwick asked innocently. "She'd had her struggles in Charms. Actually, she was one of the last students to perform a Levitation Charm, if I remember correctly. She and Neville Longbottom struggled terribly, I'm afraid."

"*No surprises there,*" Snape muttered under his breath.

"I'm quite pleased to report that Mister Longbottom has made simply astounding progress of late," Flitwick continued.

"He's found some people that like and accept him," Daphne replied.

"Don't be so modest to leave your ward unnamed, Dressler," Snape said, his voice dripping with venomous sarcasm. "He should be recognized for his success in what seemed to be a hopeless reclamation project. It remains exactly that in my class, of course."

"Certainly not in mine," Professor Sprout chipped in cheerfully. "I daresay Neville's got a future in Herbology. An excellent memory for

the material, and a good pair of hands on that boy. Nice and controlled, firm without being too gentle.”

If Snape looked disgusted during the discussion of Hermione’s virtues, he looked like he was going to be physically ill as the teachers continued to compliment his least favorite student.

“He’s made some progress in Transfiguration as well,” McGonagall said proudly.

Snape got up abruptly. “I left a Potion to boil. Excuse me.” He nearly bowled Flitwick over in his haste to leave.

Professor Sprout looked puzzled. “Was it something we said?”

Daphne snorted into her tea. They looked at her, and she gave them an innocent smile in return.

Chapter 8: Movements of Shadow

Amelia Bones, Head of the Ministry of Magic's Department of Magical Law Enforcement, and one of the Light's most respected and powerful witches, sat expectantly in her office, keeping her eyes on the door and not the others in the room. That her attention remained on the man who was not yet present was remarkable, given the nature of the other individuals in the room. In addition to her faithful secretary (and the mother of a Member of Dumbledore's Order of the Phoenix), Andromeda Black Tonks, around the room, seated from left to right, were the Ministry veteran Alexander Smith, Head of the Department for International Magical Cooperation, the compassionate and fearless Heather Stoutheart, the newly promoted Head of the Department for the Control and Regulation of Magical Creatures, the tall and imposing Jericho Drake, and her old friend Harold Kendrick, a Light stalwart and leader of the Pureblood Council. More recently, he'd served as the most sensible and honorable of Cornelius Fudge's advisors.

Harold gave her a questioning look, his blue eyes searching her expression for clues of what was to come. She did her best to betray nothing. Finally, the door swung open, and a pair of crimson-clad Aurors strode in, taking up guard positions on either side of the doorframe. Amelia had to hide a smile when she recognized the two bodyguards that Rufus had decided to bring. Nymphadora Tonks didn't even acknowledge her mother, and Kingsley Shacklebolt was as stoic and unfazed as ever. Between the two came a tall, well-built man, featuring the beard that had, along with his assertive presence in the upper levels of the Ministry, lent the man his nickname of "the Lion." *Ironic for a former Slytherin*, Amelia thought.

Rufus was an intimidating presence: a tireless worker, a ferocious fighter, and a ruthless political adversary. But Amelia was one of the few that had seen his lighter side, including a fine sense of humor and a compassion and genuine concern for the Aurors that served under him that few in the position had boasted. "Good morning Amelia," he said. "Alex. Jericho. Mrs. Tonks. Harold. Heather," he said, nodding at each of them. "It's good to see all of you. It seems that we have a decision to make."

"A number of them," Amelia said. "Because of the nature of this discussion, and the fact that what we might be talking about could be considered treason, I must insist that your friends leave the room."

Scrimgeour nodded. "While I have the utmost faith in these two, I will do as you ask." He turned to the Aurors, who stood at attention. "Tonks. Shacklebolt. Take a walk. Be back in one hour. If you happen to wander by my office and distract a certain pet of the Minister, all the better."

The Aurors saluted, and exited. When the door closed, Rufus finally took his seat. "So. Amelia? Would you please explain why we are here, holding this secret cabal? I daresay the Minister would not be pleased if he knew of this meeting."

"The Minister will keep," Drake said, sounding exasperated. "I've had quite enough of that fool."

"A vindictive, petty man with no more courage than he has common decency," Stoutheart agreed. "Such violent disdain for magical creatures. My predecessor served no one's interests but that of wizards, which is in my mind a complete betrayal of the responsibilities inherent in the position." Her hatred of Fudge was clear. Stoutheart, from a Light family that might have died out two generations ago if not for the somewhat miraculous pregnancy of Heather's grandmother at the age of sixty, was not one to waste words. Again the survival of the line was threatened; Heather Stoutheart, quite beautiful in her youth, had never married. There were rumors, of course, that she had never found a man she wanted to marry because there was no *man* that she wanted to marry. While there were some with more old-fashioned views on that subject, Amelia was more than willing to live and let live. What women such as Heather Stoutheart did in her private time was no affair of hers. What did matter was that Miss Stoutheart was a strong, independent, fiery woman with progressive views when it came to relations between magical creatures and the wizarding community. In Amelia's view, the retirement of the cantankerous and arrogant Robert Stratford could not have come at a better time.

"Our opinions of the Minister aside," Amelia said, "I have come with interesting news. As all of you are aware, my niece Susan is a student at Hogwarts, in the same year as a certain Slytherin of whom we are all acquainted."

"Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived," Drake added, somewhat unnecessarily.

"An interesting young man, to be sure," Alexander said, stroking his blond goatee thoughtfully. "He is powerful, but raw. Dangerous if left unchecked. Dumbledore attempts to guide him but he is little more than a blunt instrument. I hear rumors he feels that it is *his* destiny to be the leader of the Light."

"And yet his first move it to enter into an alliance with Aiden Greengrass. I hadn't thought the boy to be stupid," Harold said, saying the name of his opposite number like a curse. Aiden, as good a manipulator and politician as they came, constantly frustrated the attempts of men like Kendrick to reel in the Dark families, and ban their dangerous and reckless use of magic. Aiden was a formidable foe, and Harold hated him, because of what he stood for. Harold saw Aiden Greengrass as representing the forces of "conservative chaos," to use his own words. A paradox yes, but so were the aims of the Dark purebloods...or so the Light believed. Amelia was not always so certain. After all, the Dark families were forever outnumbered. They had to aggressively protect their interests, or lose their power and prestige.

"Foolish, yes," Scrimgeour said. "Stupid...I'm not so certain. Aiden is a powerful ally for the Boy-Who-Lived. It was a move made out of naivety, out of ignorance, but not idiocy. Potter is smarter than we give him credit for. More importantly, he is surrounded by many older and wiser than him; men and women who seek to give him direction and to harness his ability. Some serve their own interests, others truly care for him."

"Even if his alliance with Aiden Greengrass could be explained as a rational and reasoned decision, his pact with the Burkes is sheer madness," Alex said grimly. "Potter is inexperienced in the realm of politics, and I suspect his actions are in no small part motivated by his

desire to establish his independence, to show Dumbledore and the others that he is no mere child and will act as he sees fit with or without their approval.”

Amelia nodded. She felt it was time to re-direct this conversation. “As I was saying, Susan is...acquainted with Potter. Without my knowledge, she sent him a letter this summer, essentially pledging her Housemates’ allegiance to him in the aftermath of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named’s return...an event that I believe I am correct in saying we all acknowledge has happened.”

There were nods around the room. Few of the Light families believed Fudge’s claims that Potter had made up his account of the graveyard duel as a desperate plea for attention. They had felt the eddies and tides of the magic shifting toward the Dark, and knew that could only mean one thing. Such palpable changes only happened when the entrance of new extremely powerful players affected the balance of power. Dumbledore was one such player. His presence had become ever stronger in the wake of his defeat of Grindelwald, only to be diminished by the rise of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named around thirty years ago. They had all felt the ripples and reverberations in the current of magic when Harry Potter had come into his own, when his magic, somehow contained, had been unleashed, accomplishing something to that point unheard of: the utter annihilation of Dementors *en masse*.

No, few denied the return of the Dark Lord. But the Light was divided on what to do about it. They’d suffered greatly in the first war, and the patriarchs and matriarchs of the leading families, from whom the rest took their lead, were more than a little reluctant to hurl themselves into the fray, even when Voldemort was still so weak. Amelia questioned that wisdom: why not strike when Voldemort was at his weakest? Yet she saw reason in the hesitation. Lord Voldemort was not just powerful; he was a magical genius, a man of tremendous intellect as well as unparalleled cruelty. He wouldn’t fight the same war twice. And the leaders of the Light supposed that the Dark Lord must have some hidden asset waiting to be used. Potter wasn’t supposed to have survived his ordeal in the graveyard; that much was certain. This told Amelia that Lord Voldemort was not yet ready to use his secret weapon. Was there truth to the rumors of Death

Eater recruitment on the continent? Would the vampires take a side? Where did the werewolves stand? The goblins?

These questions had to be answered, and answered quickly, or the Light might not act until it was too late.

"Susan is a leader in her class, no doubt," Harold said. "Leadership runs in the family, I suppose."

Amelia couldn't help but show a proud and appreciative smile. Alexander wasn't so enthusiastic. "Leadership may run in the Bones' line, but I'm not so sure about wisdom. What can your niece possibly know about Potter, about his character that would lead her to take such an action? The boy is a recluse, dabbling in the Dark Arts, convinced of his own importance in the events to come. He is a nexus, yes, but of what we cannot yet be sure. Yet he seems to think he knows exactly what his role is to be, and that is a leader. He is many things, but a leader is not one of them."

Amelia bristled at the insult to the youngest of her proud line. "Susan is young, yes, but she is no fool. Her action was taken in light of the late Cedric Diggory's active defense of Potter's honor and integrity in the months leading up to his death. Her faith in his character was only strengthened by the fact that Harry brought Cedric's body back with him when he could easily have left it to carrion. You cannot begin to understand what that action meant to the Hufflepuffs as a whole, not to mention Cedric's parents."

"Is the boy a Gryffindor or a Slytherin?" Harold asked, his voice edged with sarcasm. "I seem to have forgotten in this conversation of his honor and heroism."

Scrimgeour sat straight upright, his eyes flashing. "And what exactly is *that* supposed to mean? Tread carefully, old friend. Do not dare to insult Slytherin House in my presence."

"You cannot deny that your House has a tendency to churn out a few of the more unseemly-" Alexander began.

"Enough of this," Amelia snapped. "We are not discussing the virtues of the Houses of Hogwarts. We are discussing Harry Potter, and where we stand on him."

"Why must we take a stance?" Stoutheart asked. "His importance is hardly assured. It remains to be seen if the Dark Lord's desire to see him dead is nothing more than a personal vendetta."

Scrimgeour laughed.

"You find something funny?" the woman said, her voice tight and irritated.

"Oh, I do," the Lion said. "I find it most amusing that you seem to have developed selective amnesia when it comes to a certain conversation you had with Ragnok Clawbender. A conversation that was most enlightening when it came to young Mr. Potter, and how a very valuable constituency of our wizarding world views his importance. A constituency that you ought to be most concerned with, given your position."

Stoutheart looked more than a little stunned. "How did you..?"

"My methods are none of your concern," Scrimgeour replied evenly. "What does concern you is what the goblin said."

"Which, pray tell, was?" Alexander said.

Heather took a deep breath. The middle aged woman with Nordic features looked like she had aged twenty years in the space of a second. "He said...he said that in his long life, he had never encountered a more peculiar human wizard. He also said...that if there was ever a wizard that goblins might come to respect, that his kind might allow themselves to be led by...it was Harry Potter."

There was silence in the room for a long moment, except for the sound of Andromeda Black Tonks scribbling her notes furiously. All of them were stunned by the implications...well, everyone but Scrimgeour. Andi suddenly let her quill fall from her hand, as she too realized when the Head of the Department for the Control and Regulation of Magical Creatures had just said. Goblins *never* admitted

respect for one not of their own race. They rarely complimented one another. To say outright to the woman entrusted with managing relations between the Ministry and the goblin enclaves that there was a *wizard* they might some day follow willingly...it was utterly unheard of.

"We will have to take this under advisement, if it is indeed true," Alexander said slowly.

"It is true," Scrimgeour said. "Every last word of it." Alex glanced at Heather, who nodded silently.

Amelia took a deep breath. "It seems we have reached an impasse. We are in agreement that Harry Potter is of far more consequence than the average wizard his age, but we scarcely agree on what that means for each of us, and, more important, the Light itself."

"Don't be hasty, Amelia," Alexander said, raising a hand. "Perhaps before we decide what we should do, we should first determine if there is a realistic course that calls for taking any manner of action."

"Ultimately, he will be one of us, of course," Kendrick said. "His lineage is that of the Light. He cannot deny his heritage."

"Yet is he a Potter in little but name," Scrimgeour pointed out. "I need not remind you of who raised him after his parents were murdered."

"Regardless of her methods, Dressler remains loyal to the Light," Kendrick insisted. "She was raised well. She has strayed from the straight and true path, yes, but she has found her way back."

"Has she?" Rufus asked, his eyes darkening. "Perhaps it might be wise to reserve judgment of the woman for the man who has had recent personal interaction with her."

"And what is your assessment?" Alexander asked, sounding impatient.

"Shereeks of Dark Magic," Scrimgeour said. "The Grey Maiden has not changed her ways. She exists on the edge of the law, living off of the glory of her past accomplishments, protected from prosecution by

her association with Dumbledore and past service as an Auror. She deserves none of that protection.”

“Not exactly a ringing endorsement of the woman now responsible for instructing my daughter,” Amelia muttered.

“And my nephew,” Alexander added.

“I advised Dumbledore against hiring her, but as has become the norm, he did not listen to me,” Scrimgeour said. “She is not really that dangerous to any but her enemies, but to call her stable would be a stretch. No, I am most concerned by her potential influence on Potter. That Potter is a Slytherin might ordinarily not concern me. However, the particular class of which he is a part is...worrisome. He sleeps mere meters from the sons and daughters of Death Eaters and prominent Dark wizards. I do not think it a coincidence that Potter’s first alliance came with Aiden Greengrass, whose daughter Daphne is Potter’s classmate.”

“Do you really believe he’d join the Dark?” Stoutheart asked, sounding as if the very idea were unthinkable. Amelia felt a cold lump in the pit of her stomach.

“I believe that ultimately there is a real possibility he’ll do just that,” Scrimgeour whispered. “I don’t imagine it will be any time in the near future. But without an anchor to hold him to the Light - and his guardian is no one’s anchor - he will drift.”

Drake made an odd noise in the back of his throat. “I’m not entirely certain I understand your position, Rufus. With one hand you advocate for the boy and which the other you pronounce him a lost cause. Since you seem to be the most informed on this issue, what would you propose?”

Scrimgeour was silent for a moment, thinking it over. “I would hold off on immediate action. However, I would think it useful if one of the more influential Light families countered Greengrass’s move and offered the possibility of an alliance.”

“And who would take such a risk?” Alexander asked, sounding skeptical.

"We would," Amelia said, rising. "And we shall. I will instruct Susan to approach Potter, and we will work from there." Amelia had her misgivings, of course. She hadn't told the others everything that Susan had included in her letter, specifically, the confrontation they'd had, a result, it seemed, of Potter's lack of experience and overconfidence in his own abilities. It was to be expected of one of his age, raised without a formal grounding in pureblood traditions. He would have to learn.

And Amelia decided that she would be the one to teach him.

Scrimgeour measured her with his gaze. "Very well. I suggest we adjourn until next week. We will be missed eventually. Amelia will be able to report on the results of her overtures to Potter, and I will gather as much information as I can find on the activities of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Let us not forget the threat that he poses."

"Indeed," Alexander said. "As intriguing as the business concerning Potter is, the reality is that he is of secondary importance. We cannot act yet. Indeed, I doubt we'll be able to put together any kind of cohesive force of Light families until it becomes obvious that Voldemort is as dangerous now as he was then. We are also condemned to inaction so long as we lack a target. In the meantime, I would advise all of you to reestablish contact with your most trusted allies, and find out where they stand."

The meeting broke up, and with the usual pleasantries, the guests departed, leaving Amelia and her secretary alone. Andromeda was still writing up the minutes of the meeting. "Andromeda," Amelia said. The woman looked up.

"I need not remind you that what you just heard is confidential information. You will use the utmost discretion when it comes to discussing these meetings with any one, including your friends and family. Am I clear?"

"Yes, Ma'am," Andromeda replied.

"Good," Amelia said. She wondered if her desire to create an alliance between the Bones family and the last Potter had more to do with fear he might become a powerful weapon for the Dark families than it

did her belief that he was worthy of such a commitment. Still, she sensed that Potter was of tremendous importance. He was the kind of individual that had a tendency to find himself in the middle of extraordinary events.

She drew out a quill and a piece of parchment, and began to write.

Harry entered the Room of Requirement to a sight that had become all the more familiar as this year had passed from September into November. He moved silently, taking up position behind but well back from the action, staying out of danger.

Blaise Zabini, wearing a sweat-soaked undershirt and worn trousers, wielded his large broadsword with more skill and confidence than Harry had ever seen before. He thrust the sword forward at an imaginary target, putting his weight behind it but was still careful not to lose his balance. Harry noted the subtle but significant tweaks his friend had made to his technique. Blaise pulled the weapon back, slashing right, slashing left, thrusting again, parrying high, and cutting at the air where an opponent's head might have been.

Harry had thought that he'd remained unnoticed, but Blaise spun around, holding the two-handed blade before him, in a ready position. Harry saw an intensity in his friend's eyes that had never been present before. He saw a glimpse of the maturity that Blaise had always seemed to lack.

"Getting some work in?" Harry asked.

Blaise nodded, relaxing his stance. "I've been at it for about an hour now. It's getting easier the more time I spend. Thank Merlin for Goblin metalwork; this sword's light enough that I can actually hold the thing for that long. Muggle steel's about twice the weight."

Harry nodded. "I figured I might find you here, actually. I haven't seen much of you lately."

"Some things have been happening," Blaise said.

"Is something wrong?"

“Not exactly,” Harry’s friend replied. He looked at Harry oddly for a moment. “Why don’t you give it a try?”

Harry was caught off guard by that request. “Say that again?”

“There’s an extra sword right over there,” Blaise said, pointing. “I could use a sparring partner. And I think you could use some extra weapons in your arsenal, no offense.”

“None taken,” Harry said, as he went to retrieve the sword. Tentatively, he lifted it off the ground. It was much lighter than he’d anticipated. Probably best wielded with two hands, but still light enough that it could be wielded one handed if necessary. Well, with practice, that was. The cold hilt felt strange in Harry’s hands.

“Come over here. I’ll go easy on you,” Blaise urged him.

“Shouldn’t we wear some kind of protection?” Harry asked as he dropped into a bad imitation of a ready position, correcting his balance as the weight of the sword drew him forwards, towards the floor.

“Not necessary,” Blaise replied. “The blades have a Blunting Charm on them. Mind, they are still hard and heavy, and they hurt if you get whacked by one, but we won’t have any severed limbs.”

“At least there’s that,” Harry breathed, a trace of sarcasm in his voice.

Blaise raised his sword to his chest and then swung it to his right and down, rising to meet Harry’s hasty block with a loud clang. “Not bad,” Blaise said.

“I could see what you were trying to do,” Harry replied.

“You could, could you?” Blaise asked. “Try this.”

Blaise began a cut at Harry’s shoulder, which Harry moved to block. Abruptly he swept down, his blade, although dull, tracing down Harry’s torso and poking into his stomach. He would be picking his internal organs off the floor if this was for real. Blaise pulled his sword back, dropping into a ready position. He cut quickly at Harry’s legs,

before Harry was even set. Harry instinctively leapt over the blade, but landed awkwardly on his right foot. Wincing, he came back to block Blaise's next hack, this one from straight over the top. Their swords met, but Blaise had considerable momentum on his side, and even as Harry tried to bend his knees to absorb the force of the blow, he was knocked to the floor, landing hard on his behind.

Blaise extended a hand, and helped pull Harry to his feet. "Not bad, really. You look like you've actually got a decent idea of what you are doing."

"These things are a bit ungainly," Harry said, grunting with exertion.

Blaise shrugged. He went to a set position, and then swung the blade in a series of fast hacks, cuts, and slashes. His sword was a blur of motion. He came back to a ready position. "When you get used to it, you can do a lot more with this thing. Goblin steel is considerably lighter than Muggle metals. Still, you look a tad off balance. Maybe you ought to try something lighter."

"It could also be that I haven't the slightest clue what I'm doing," Harry suggested.

"Could," Blaise admitted. "But I don't think so. Hmmm...maybe a longsword?"

On cue, a new weapon appeared on a rack behind Blaise. A bit longer, with a much thinner blade and stream-lined design, it looked to be a bit easier to wield. "I've experimented with all kinds of blades in the past, but I really like the raw power of this broadsword," Blaise commented. "It's tough to block. I've really had to build up my arm muscles to wield it without exhausting myself, but it's been worth the effort. Useless when it comes to thrusting, though. It's so heavy that it takes your whole body with it. You almost use it like you would a club."

Harry picked up the new weapon, and immediately felt a comfort level with the weight and balance of the blade that hadn't been there with the twin of Blaise's broadsword. He experimented with a few basic cuts, not sure entirely why he seemed to be picking this up a whole

lot faster than he thought possible. "Want to go again?" Blaise asked. "How's the new sword?"

"Better," Harry replied. "And yes."

"Come on, then," Blaise said. "Why don't you attack, and I'll defend?"

Harry grunted his agreement and executed a quick slash at his opponent's shoulder. Blaise blocked it, and Harry felt his blade sliding down the edge of Blaise's sword. He jumped back and separated the pieces of Goblin steel.

"You need to work on your stances," Blaise said. "You aren't centered; you're off-balance. It'll come."

"So is this all you've been working on over the summer?" Harry asked, blocking a telegraphed strike from Blaise.

"Not all, but it took up quite a bit of time. You see, Mum and Dad didn't think that I was mature enough to bear the title of Zabini heir, much less our family's magical heir."

"Go on," Harry said.

Blaise cut lazily at Harry's neck, and Harry easily blocked it. He had to jump back against because the larger size of Blaise's weapon, added to his greater strength, meant that Harry couldn't win a battle of brute force. He had to be quick and precise, which was more than a little difficult given his utter lack of proper training. "Well, my parents spent most of the summer trying to make me grow up, I guess."

"Did they?"

"I'm not sure," Blaise answered truthfully. He frowned as he hacked at Harry's midsection. Harry choose to just dodge rather than block that blow. "I mean, I know all about our family's traditions, what it expected of me as the head of the family, who our traditional allies are, how we present ourselves to others, how we behave in certain situations...I'm not sure if I'm just better at acting the part of a proper pureblood heir more than I've really become a person suited to that."

Harry tried to attack this time, but Blaise batted his sword aside and put Harry back on the defensive. "Do you want to change?" he asked his friend.

"I suppose," Blaise said, holding back for a moment. "I mean, I think that I want to be the son that my parents want me to be. If that means I need to grow up and start taking responsibility for the family name, I guess that I want to do that."

"But what do *you* want?"

"I'm not sure how to answer that question," Blaise replied, hacking at Harry's right side. Harry deflected the blade and moved out of the way. "Nice one," Blaise said, smiling. "You are really picking this up pretty quickly."

"I've got some good instincts," Harry said. "I'm not sure where they come from, mind. You didn't give me an answer."

"Like I said," Blaise replied, "I'm not sure how to answer that question."

"Have you ever considered that you really ought to be able to answer it? You can't just live your life according to what your parents tell you to do. You'll never become the independent, strong-willed heir they want if you follow that path."

"I do want to make them proud, but it's more than that, now," Blaise said. "I think I want to prove to myself that I have it in me, that I'm not just destined to be labeled as "immature" for the rest of my life."

"Immature is a strong word," Harry said.

"Yet it's the one most often used to describe me."

Harry nodded. He couldn't argue with that. "I've had enough," he added.

"Tiring, ain't it?" Blaise said with a crooked grin. "Keep working at it, though. You are going a lot faster than I did."

"I will," Harry said. He gazed suspiciously at his friend. "Is there anything we need to talk about, Blaise? Anything at all?"

"Probably. But I'm not really sure what to say."

"Don't wait too long," Harry advised him. "I'm a good listener. I'll help you with whatever it is, if you'll let me."

"You're a good friend, Harry," Blaise said.

"So are you, Blaise. So are you."

"Just like that, Miss Morgan!" the diminutive Professor squeaked, practically jumping up and down, as the 4th year finally managed a Summoning Charm, sending a pillow on a wobbly flight path into her left hand.

Out of his view, an irritated Anne Grunitch mocked their professor's exuberant exclamation. Charms was not her good friend's favorite class. That wasn't to say her marks weren't good; though she could be as intimidating as Crabbe and Goyle when she was of a mind to, she was far brighter than the two of them and their fathers put together. No, she just didn't seem to appreciate Flitwick and his...eccentric personality much. Actually, it was safe to say that Flitwick's bad puns and squeaks of joy for his students' accomplishments were the rough equivalent of Peeves's nails digging very deeply into one of the ancient chalkboards featured in every classroom. Anne hated *that* too. Peeves had found that out the hard way...

That was another benefit of being friends with Anne Sophia Grunitch. There was no need to be on the watch for Hogwarts' resident poltergeist, because he was absolutely *terrified* of the 4th year Slytherin girl from a modest pureblood family that lived in the north of England.

Ginny's other good friend her own age was Melissa Quinn, who was her equal in neither sports nor academics, but probably had her beat in the common sense department. Melissa's intelligence was not like that of her Ravenclaw mother, who'd been one of the brightest stars

of Hogwarts during the 70s, but rather like that of her father, a successful and cunning Muggleborn innovator who dabbled in the finances of both the Muggle and wizarding worlds. Melissa's explanation of the bizarre and complicated concept of the "market" hadn't all stuck in her memory, but it seemed obvious that to be successful, one had to be quick-thinking, able to square up situations quickly, and be good at spotting good gambles and staying away from bad ones. Melissa really was quite pretty, and she'd been seeing an older Slytherin periodically since they'd gone to the Yule Ball. Ginny didn't really know anything but his name: Derek Sinclair. He was apparently quite kind and generous, and a half-blood like Melissa.

"I can only imagine what might happen if she got the wand movement down correctly," Anne groaned. "Honestly, a Summoning Charm isn't that difficult. Typical Hufflepuff to grin like that when she's managed a bit of elementary magic that any oaf ought to be able to do while he's sleeping."

Ginny frowned at her friend. "That's a bit harsh, Anne. She's been struggling with this class, you know that."

"And she'll keep struggling until she learns some self-discipline," Anne continued, casting a Summoning Charm that sent a target pillow hurtling at her like a rocket. She deftly caught it with her left hand. "If she keeps being told that it's okay to fail miserably, and gets congratulated on her most minor of successes, the best she can hope for is mediocrity."

Ginny shrugged. Anne had a point, but Ginny wasn't quite as cynical as the burly Slytherin girl.

The bell rang to dismiss the class. On cue, every student in the room stopped what they were doing and began to put their books, quills, and ink bottles back into their bags. Most students at Hogwarts enjoyed their classes...if not the large amount of homework they were assigned each night. The hurried and almost robotic exodus had far more to do with their next class, starting in 10 minutes. And none of them wanted to be late to Potions.

Ginny waited for Melissa to jam her Charms textbook in her somewhat undersized bag, and then the three Slytherins began a brisk walk to the dungeons. They moved like a school of fish, closely packed together, with the students that fell to the back constantly hurrying to overtake their companions. Ginny had an amusing mental image of Snape as a ravenous shark, waiting to devour any student that strayed too far behind the main group, in the process making himself an easy target. She stifled a laugh, a bit of self-control she probably hadn't had even a year ago. There was a certain degree of emotional restraint that was required of all Slytherins, and the demand for impassivity only got greater with each year. 4th year was widely recognized as a Slytherin's coming of age, and a year in which behavior that was immature or unbecoming to Slytherin House's reputation was no longer tolerated, least of all by their Head of House. The Hufflepuffs were also silent, although that was probably because Snape had made it his personal mission to strike fear in the hearts of that particular year of the House of the Badger, for reasons known only to himself. After all, Hannah Abbot, the dunce of dunces, was in *Harry's* class.

There was a definite chill in the damp and dank air of the dungeons, one that made Ginny shiver despite her efforts to hide her discomfort. Fortunately, no one seemed to notice. The last of them of them was in the Potions classroom no less than five minutes before class was due to begin. As if on cue, just as the last students were sitting down and chatting idly with their neighbors, the door to the classroom flew open, hitting the wall with a tremendously crash, and Snape, looking like the first person that *breathed* when they weren't supposed to would receive an *Avada Kedavra* to the forehead, no questions asked. "Oh Merlin, he's *mad*," Ginny whispered to Melissa, who nodded silently.

Snape's cape was still swaying back and forth when he began to take attendance. For the first time she could remember, he paused when he came to her name, stretching out his pronunciation of her accursed surname. She was surprised by that; she'd gotten the impression that Snape didn't really consider her a relation of the Gryffindor Weasleys, and that he might have even liked her a bit. This was disappointing...and a tad worrisome. When he'd finally sneered out the last name on the roster, he launched straight into today's

Potion, which was...*complicated*, to say the least. Actually, Polan's Drought, as it was called, looked to be the most challenging Potion he'd ever assigned. Ginny was careful to listen to Snape's every word, hushed as they were, which included more than a few barbs concerning his anticipation of the failures of certain students. Even Anne looked a tad intimidated.

"Begin," he practically spat, turning away disgustedly.

"Merlin, have you looked at this?" Melissa gasped. "Look how precise the measurements are. If we're off by one gram we might blow the bloody castle apart!"

Ginny sighed. This was not going to be fun. She wasn't nearly as good at Potions as her boyfriend; to no one's surprise, her best class was Defense Against the Dark Arts, which she'd continued to excel despite her...issues with her professor. Indeed, Daphne had commended her work on more than one occasion. It hadn't been easy, but so far she'd managed to shove the memories of what she'd seen in her 2nd year and overheard this summer to the deepest recesses of her mind, and locked them there. Daphne had her problems, but it was no business of hers...really, she had a better chance of getting hurt than actually making things better if she tried to intervene. It wasn't her place, and that was all there was to it. *Besides, it's not as though Amycus and Avery deserved any better. They'd have done worse if they'd gotten the chance.*

It wasn't as comforting a thought as it should have been.

They struggled through an absolutely brutal Potions class, double and triple-checking every step and still getting things wrong. Fortunately, they were quick-thinking enough to salvage the contents of their cauldron, and eventually created a passable imitation of the Polan's Drought Snape had shown them at the beginning of class. It was a rather useful potion; drinking a properly-brewed batch could give you heightened awareness and energy for about five hours. Drinking a badly-brewed batch could probably kill you. So it went with most of Snape's assignments, which was why he never made his students actually consume their creations. Snape might not miss the students that poisoned themselves, but their parents surely would,

and that would quickly put an end to the only career he'd ever had and likely ever would have. Nobody wanted to hire an ex-Death Eater, even one cleared of all wrongdoing, no matter how skilled he was.

When the bell rang, mercifully ending the class, Ginny was exhausted. As usual, they allowed Snape to hold them there for three extra minutes as he assigned them an essay, but she was still relieved she'd gotten through the class with her marks - and her body - unscathed.

Anne quickly explained that she needed to mail a letter to her parents, and hurried off, leaving Melissa and Ginny alone. They decided to drop off their school things before they headed for the Great Hall for lunch and took a shortcut to save time and get there before all the good food was already gone.

Chatting quietly about all manner of things, from boys to books, the two friends rounded a corner...and found themselves looking upon a rather bizarre sight. Both of them froze in their tracks.

A boy with long, scraggly brown hair was sitting cross-legged on the ground with his back to them. Ginny hadn't seen him before, but she knew from Harry's description that this couldn't be anyone other than the mysterious Peter Lowry. Of course, the sight of him sitting on the floor of the dungeons wasn't the strange part. No, it was the beaten up set of metal cooking pots that was floating in the air, moving about in repeating patterns, that really drew their attention. Ginny watched in amazement as Peter reached out a hand, and then pulled it back toward his body. She was confused until she saw the floating pots move about a meter closer. He pushed his hand out again, and the levitating pots moved back to their original position.

Still, that wasn't the really jaw-dropping part. No, the mind-blowing, eye-catching, heart-stopping bit was that he was doing all of this *without a wand*.

He twisted his right hand, and the pots all flipped over. Melissa let out a little gasp, and Peter heard it. His head spun around, and with his concentration broken, the pots clattered to the floor. Ginny was rooted to the spot, unable to move, unable to speak. *Harry was right*

again, I guess. There was no longer any doubt: this malnourished, pale, impoverished looking boy was indeed Peter Lowry.

But to Ginny's surprise, he didn't look angry. No, he looked absolutely *horrified*. He scrambled to his feet, hurriedly grabbing two of the pans and bolting even as Ginny cried out, "Peter, wait!"

His footsteps echoed through the dungeon until they finally grew too distant to be heard. Melissa stepped forward and picked up one of the pots that had been left behind in Peter's frantic flight. "Wow," she said. "I've never seen anything like that before."

"Neither have I," Ginny whispered.

"I mean, he's just a little Muggleborn Firstie," Melissa continued. "I've heard he's been all kinds of awful in his classes...but he can do *that?*"

Ginny shook her head. "I guess Harry was right. Peter Lowry isn't exactly what he appears to be."

"You can say that again," Melissa said, her voice shaking a little.

Peter ran.

He ran like he hadn't run since he'd stolen a loaf of bread from a corner store after his mother had withheld his meals as punishment for *doing it*.

Still, he wasn't so sure he'd been as frightened then as he was now. How could he have been so stupid? How could he have just decided to practice his...talents in a place where anyone could have run across him...and did?

He didn't know what he would do now. His entire Hogwarts experience had just been a series of terrible mistakes. He'd somehow gotten sorted into Slytherin House, where Muggle-born rats like himself rarely survived. He'd let slip his family's religious ties...to the great-grandson of a man his great-great-grandfather, Joseph Lowry, had apparently executed for witchcraft hundreds of years before poor little Peter had ever been born. His mother had loved to talk about

how great they'd once been, when their line had boasted generations of local magistrates in Ireland, all devout Catholics, all the way back to the reign of Mary Stuart. The particular incident which had made Peter the most hated person in Slytherin had occurred at a time and place where it was exceedingly rare for men or women to be charged with witchcraft, but it was only the last chapter of a long and bloody history that stretched back into a time when superstition and fear of Satanic possession was a fact of life. And apparently, as well as making his destitute mother proud to be a Lowry, his surname had earned a bit of a reputation in the magical community as well.

Just fitting that Peter would turn out to be a wizard, then.

Peter was running so hard that he nearly ran straight into a girl that was standing in his path, but she deftly stepped aside as he flew past her. Abruptly, he stopped running, even though his mind was screaming at him to keep going, to run until his legs gave out.

His body didn't seem to be under his control as his gaze came to rest on the girl he'd nearly bowled over. Short, with long, curly blond hair and odd blue eyes, she was also barefoot despite the cold of the dungeons. Her wand, he noticed, was tucked behind her left ear. She smiled gently. "Don't be afraid," she said in a soft, comforting voice. "I'm not going to hurt you."

"Let me go," he demanded, struggling against the hold on his mind and body. "Please," he begged.

"Sshhhh," she said, holding her finger to her lips. "You're safe, Peter. No one can hurt you now."

"W-w-who are you?" Peter asked, frightened. The girl's voice had a strange, ethereal quality to it, and he felt as if he was falling under her spell. His thoughts were slow and his senses dulled. He was alarmed by this, but couldn't seem to do anything to fight it. "What do you want?"

"I don't really want anything from you, Peter. I'd like to help you."

"A lot of people have been telling that recently," Peter retorted. "I dunno who I can trust."

"You can trust me."

"Of course you'd say that," Peter replied. "What are you doing to me?"

The girl blinked. "I'm not doing anything," she said innocently.

"L-I-liar!" he finally got out, his voice shaking. His body was physically strained, his voice high and almost squeaky. His embarrassment only added to his discomfort.

"Why would I lie to you?" the girl asked.

"Who are you? Why are you doing this to me?" Peter demanded again.

"Well, my name is Luna. Luna Lovegood. And I'm trying to help you."

"Let me go," Peter said. "Please. I won't run."

Luna shrugged, and blinked. Abruptly the mental and physical restraints were gone. Peter shivered in the cold. "How did you do that?" he asked.

"I have gifts," Luna said, as if it was inconsequential. "As do you."

"I can't do anything," Peter replied. "I'm useless at this whole magic thing."

"Don't be silly," Luna said, moving closer to him. "Just because you don't use a wand doesn't mean what you do isn't magic. You are very, very talented."

"Really?" Peter asked, feeling a surge of hope for the first time in a while.

Luna nodded. "I'm sorry for lying to you. But I needed to get you to listen. I promise I won't hurt you. I know what it's like to be labeled as an oddball or a freak. What I can do is quite unique as well."

"Are people scared of you too?" Peter asked.

Luna smiled strangely. "Sometimes."

"Can you help me control it?" Peter asked. "When I'm calm and focused, I can do those things with the pots. But when I get angry...I can do other things...things I didn't mean to do."

Luna nodded sympathetically. "You aren't alone, Peter."

"I'm always alone," he replied dejectedly.

"It doesn't have to be that way," Luna said, cocking her head to one side.

"Then what do you want me to do?" Peter asked.

"Come with me," Luna said, smiling. "I'd like the company."

"Where are we going?" Peter asked.

"Why would I know the answer to that question?" she replied, before she began skipping down the hall. Peter, declining the chance to run away, hurried to catch up.

Harry stared at his girlfriend in astonishment. He'd been studying hard for a Potions "challenge" the next day during his special lessons with Snape. He knew nothing about it except that it would involve very few instructions and require a great deal of creativity. Hermione was writing a History of Magic essay, one that was maybe a foot longer than it needed to be, and getting longer by the minute. Hermione had been scribbling furiously, dead to the world, before Ginny and her friend Melissa had burst into the Room of Requirement.

"Alright, repeat that again," Harry said. "Slower this time."

Ginny told him again what she and Melissa had seen Peter Lowry doing. Harry's heart began to beat a little faster. What the redhead was describing could only be wandless magic. It was stupendously rare for a witch or wizard to be born with the innate capacity for wandless magic. It was certainly unheard of for a Muggleborn to

possess such a gift. "I was right," Harry said, feeling a bit of vindication.

"It sure sounds like it," Hermione said, having been snapped out of her trance by the conversation going on in front of her. "That's absolutely incredible. To be gifted with that kind of natural control of wandless magic...the odds are just..."

"Do you think anyone else knows about this?" Harry asked quickly.

Ginny shrugged. "I haven't the slightest clue."

Harry nodded.

"Do you think Dumbledore knows?" Hermione asked.

Harry thought about it for a moment, and then shook his head. "I don't think so. I can't imagine that Dumbledore knows much about him at all. If he knew about his talents, he'd know about how desperate his situation is. He'd intervene."

"Like he did with you?" Ginny asked, a hard edge to her voice.

"That was different," Harry insisted. "I'm as bitter as anyone that no one took notice of how bloody awful a time I was having, but Dumbledore didn't know; couldn't know that things had gotten that bad."

"He saw you in front of the Mirror! He saw what it was doing to you. He saw what you looked like every meal. He saw that you weren't at meals." Ginny growled between gritted teeth.

Hermione spun around. "Wait, what? What's that about the mirror?"

Harry groaned. Hermione didn't know about that particular part of his First Year. He'd told Ginny in the strictest confidence. It just wasn't something he wanted to talk about. Truth be told he was more than a little irritated with his girlfriend for bringing it up. She was bringing back some of his old reservations about Hogwarts's Headmaster, and he didn't need that right now. "It's not important."

"Don't you dare try that with me, Harry James Potter," Hermione shot back. "I know what that mirror has capable of, what it has done. And as far as I was aware, when you and I first laid eyes on the mirror with Quirrell standing in front of it, it was the *first* time either one of us had seen it!" Hermione was incensed.

"It was four years ago, Hermione," Harry replied hotly. "It's in the past."

Hermione shot him an angry look, but kept her silence. Harry knew she wouldn't have stopped a few years ago, but she'd grown more accustomed to tolerating Harry's secrecy.

"If Dumbledore doesn't help him, then we should," Ginny said.

"I didn't hear you saying that before we knew what he was capable of," Hermione said, an undercurrent of distaste in her voice.

"That's not fair!" Ginny shot back. "I hadn't actually seen this kid before just now."

"Stop it, both of you," Harry barked, a little louder than he'd intended. "This isn't helping."

"What do you think we should do?" Ginny asked.

"What can we do? Are you proposing that we kidnap him?" Hermione replied.

"Of course not!" Ginny shot back. "But we can't just wait for him to walk in to our midst."

"I'm not sure you are right about that one, Gin," Harry said, staring at the two figures that had just moved into view. "Hello Luna."

"Hello Harry," Luna said, smiling. "I've got someone I think you'd like to meet."

Standing beside her was Peter Lowry, looking for all the world like a London street rat. The boy was shaking, his eyes darting around, furiously trying to look at all of them simultaneously.

"It's okay, Peter," Hermione said quietly. "You're safe here. No one is going to hurt you."

Peter looked at Luna, who nodded. "She's quite nice, as long as you aren't a Fungoworm. They die when they are forced to absorb too much information."

Ginny snorted. Hermione's welcoming smile was strained, but she held it. Luna put a hand on the boy's shoulder, and slowly walked towards them.

At that instant, Harry's scar erupted. He bit back a cry at first, but fell out of his chair. His vision went black, and images began flashing before his eyes.

Dementors swarmed about a stone courtyard, as overwhelmed men wearing the uniform of Azkaban's guards desperately cast Patronuses, trying to fend off the horde. A few managed more than gray smoke, but they were being overwhelmed. Harry saw the fear in their eyes as the monsters turned upon their handlers, seizing them in long skeletal arms and lifting them off the ground, bringing their terrified faces closer. Inhuman screams tore through the air. The scene rippled, and changed.

Black-clad figures moved about a stone corridor, wands drawn. The lead figure moved around a corner, revealing a sleeping guard sitting on a wooden stool. He awoke with a jolt, slowly coming back to awareness. He blinked in confusion, and his eyes gradually widened with fear. There was a flash of green, and he was thrown back off the stool, crashing to the stone floor, dead.

The handful of figures spread out into the cellblock, and began systematically blasting open cell doors. Some of the prisoners had to be helped out, others embraced their rescuers.

Harry's vision went red for an instant, before he found himself staring out over the courtyard, strewn with the newly-soulless bodies of Azkaban's guards. A skeletal white hand reached forth into the sky, raising a jet-black wand. There was a burst of green light, and a small explosion that coalesced into the Dark Mark.

"Remember me, Harry Potter. Remember me," Voldemort hissed. It was the first sound he'd heard.

Harry's vision went black, and all that could be heard was the chilling echoes of the Dark Lord's laughter.

"...Harry, wake up! Oh Gods, what's wrong with him?" Hermione's voice rang in his ears.

"Harry, please..." Ginny begged, shaking his shoulders.

"Should we get help?" Neville's voice asked. *When did he get here?* Harry wondered. Awareness slowly returned to him. He groaned.

"Oh thank Merlin," Ginny breathed.

Harry's eyes fluttered open. Ginny was leaning over him, holding his hand, Hermione behind her, looking terrified. Melissa stood well back from them, staying out of the way. He couldn't see Peter, Luna, or the apparently present Neville.

"What happened?" Hermione asked. "Can you sit up? Are you in pain?"

"Voldemort," Harry gasped. Or tried to, but it seemed that no one had actually understood him. Ginny shifted forward, pulling his head into her lap.

"I was so frightened," she said quietly, stroking his forehead.

"What happened?" Hermione asked again.

"V-V-Voldemort," Harry got out. His body was shaking and feverish.

"What about him?" Ginny asked.

Harry took in a precious gulp of cool air. "V-V-Voldemort's t-t-taken Az-A-Az-Azkaban," he stuttered. "It's begun."

A/N: So, as I promised, this chapter didn't take all that long. Unfortunately, I can't promise the same for the next one. I just haven't

had that much time to write. Hopefully I get a creative burst and get this thing going again soon. I'm going to finish this, it's just a matter of how long it takes.

The first scene was really fun to write, and a chance to give names and personalities to the big movers and shakers of the Light. If you can't already tell, I'm a fan of Rufus Scrimgeour. He's a politician, and his loyalty to the Light is a tad irrational, but he's a good guy. Governments work because there are politicians to make them work. Scrimgeour ended up looking about as bad as Fudge in Rowling's books, and that irritates me. This will not be the last time you see Kendrick, Stoutheart (who, yes, qualifies as the first homosexual character in the series, because even if I don't have any great enthusiasm to write gay relationships, I'm not going to pretend that they don't exist), Smith, and Drake. If they seem like they are being ridiculously cautious, consider that rebellion and revolution isn't exactly ingrained in pureblood culture. Deference to the rules and authority are.

So, that's why Harry's so interested in ickle Peter. He has the minor ability to magically move objects with his mind. To put how rare that is in perspective, let's just say that there hasn't been anyone born with such telekinetic abilities, much less a Muggleborn, in a few centuries. Luna's meddling again, but she's got Peter's best interests at heart.

If you were wondering what Voldemort's been up to, you have your answer. Voldemort's a bit bolder this time around. He's built up his forces and struck when and where it wasn't expected. Why stage a jailbreak when you can commandeer the Dementors and overwhelm the rest of the guards? Such a bold move ought to spur even Fudge to action, but he's just as likely to be terrified and unwilling to admit he was horribly wrong.

Thanks for all the reviews and support.

Chapter 9: The Games We Play

Albus Dumbledore looked upon the Boy-Who-Lived with great concern. After hearing the boy's account, there was little doubt left in his mind that Voldemort had finally come into the open, with a bold, brilliantly planned and executed raid on Azkaban that would add more veteran and embittered Death Eaters to his already-growing ranks. Harry's skin was pale, his breathing was ragged, and his eyes had a haunted look that only came when one had seen far too much death.

"Are you alright, Potter?" Severus Snape asked, a surprising degree of concern in his voice. If it had been anyone but Slytherin's Head of House, Albus would have scarcely been surprised, given the boy's state. Still, for the Potions Master to show such genuine concern for the boy...Albus wasn't sure he could recall another occasion like this.

"I'm fine," came Harry's predictable response. "Just a little shaken up."

"Indeed," Severus replied, with a touch of amusement in his voice.

Albus leveled his gaze with Harry. "We could continue this conversation after you've been cared for by Madam Pomfrey."

"That won't be necessary," Harry assured him. "I'm just...I suppose it just caught me off guard. I haven't had a vision like that for ages."

"Clearly, the Dark Lord has more direct control over your mental link than you do, if he is so easily able to shut you out of his thoughts when he so desires," Snape said quietly. "Not that I'm surprised by that, of course. When it comes to the affairs of the mind, I have never met a man so terrifyingly capable than the Dark Lord."

The door to Dumbledore's office swung open and Daphne Dressler hurried in, moving to Harry's side. "I came as quickly as I could," she assured him. He nodded silently in response.

"What did you see?" she asked.

Harry repeated the details of his vision, his voice dead and emotionless. The concern in his guardian's eyes grew. "So this is his

first move. A bold one, no doubt. But if he wishes to take advantage of the Minister's cowardice and unwillingness to act, why would he strike so openly?"

"You forget, Dressler, that Azkaban is as remote a locale as they come. And as far as we know, there are no survivors capable of reporting what happened there. The Ministry leadership knows, or will soon know, but we cannot assume they will act," Snape said, his tone oddly civil.

"Is Fudge that much of a coward?" Harry asked. "It's one thing to ignore events that don't *directly* affect you. But Voldemort just broke into Azkaban, freed his followers, and took out the entire garrison. And the Dementors have clearly left the control of the Ministry. How can he just ignore something like this?"

"He's made a career out of it," Snape replied. "If some of the more responsible members of the Ministry – Amelia Bones, Rufus Scrimgeour, Harold Kendrick, Alexander Smith, and the like – learn of what has happened, they will force Fudge to act, or threaten to have him removed."

"Can't we help that process along?" Harry asked, his voice still shaking. Daphne put a comforting hand on his shoulder. "Tell them what we know? An expedition to Azkaban will provide all the evidence we could possibly need."

"As Minister, Cornelius Fudge has absolute authority over Azkaban. It's been that way for about a century," Albus said. "He can deny that request, and without any evidence, the other members of the Ministry leadership could not do anything to stop him."

"But the Aurors that were stationed there..."

"Were also under the direct control of Cornelius Fudge," Albus said. "The commander of the garrison, Thaddeus Griffin, was actually chosen by Fudge's predecessor. But he reports to the Minister. The Aurors of Azkaban are not technically part of the Auror Office which Rufus heads."

"Why in Merlin's name would it work like that?" Harry demanded.

"Old laws that were never changed," Daphne said. "About 110 years ago, the Head of the Auror Office was convicted of orchestrating the smuggling of certain amenities to certain prisoners, in exchange for a variety of favors from their friends outside. It's long in the past, but at the time, the Wizengamot responded by placing the control of the Auror detachment at Azkaban under the direct control of the current Minister, who was quite well regarded and trusted. The problem is that no one ever saw fit to correct that law. The reasoning for keeping it is that the Minister is elected and can be removed by a democratic process, while his underlings are appointed, often holdovers from old Ministries, and more prone to corruption."

"The irony is priceless," Snape commented.

"It would be if so many lives were not at stake," Daphne said. "Albus, there must be something we can do."

"We can inform our allies in the Ministry, at the very least," was his reply. "But I would not count on prompt action. Most of the powerful individuals within the ministry might be reluctant to risk their status and possibly their lives on our behalf without great consideration."

"Then we can't count on them," Daphne replied instantly. Harry could almost see the gears in her sharp mind turning. The intensity in her eyes, the focus, was unlike anything he'd ever seen. She turned to look at him, and then shifted her gaze to Dumbledore. "Then we act on our own. We turn Fudge's worst nightmare into a reality. You could do it."

Dumbledore looked taken aback by the very suggestion. Snape hissed disdainfully at the plan. But Harry was the first to speak. "Are you bloody *insane*? Have you completely lost your rutting mind? We wouldn't stand a chance."

"Are you telling me you are frightened of *Fudge*?" Daphne replied disbelievingly.

Snape cleared his throat in preparation for his own vicious entry into this debate, but Harry cut him off again. "Bloody Hell Daphne!" he

practically shrieked. "Did you pay any attention to what Aurelis was saying during your training? Did he even *give* you any training?"

Daphne's eyes narrowed to slits, face narrowing, her body tensing. Her expression was that of indignant rage. "How *dare* you?" she cried. "How dare you, my own *son*, use my past against me? I have done nothing to you that can justify that kind of attack."

"I find his methods to be quite appropriate, actually," Snape said quietly. "He simple utilized the most effective tool at his disposal to force you to stop your deranged ramblings."

Daphne's response was a wordless Flinging Hex that sent the Potions Master hurtling backwards toward the wall of Dumbledore's office with frightening violence. The Cushioning Charm employed by the occupant of the aforementioned office probably saved Severus Snape a cracked skull, or worse. The Headmaster turned his expression of rage on Harry's guardian. McGonagall seemed frozen in shock. Snape got up slowly, wiping the blood that was trickling from both nostrils. "So, have we met the real Daphne Dressler at last?" he asked in a malicious whisper. "Is this what the Grey Maiden has been reduced to? No more than an angry child lashing out at those around her?"

Daphne ignored him. Her attention remained riveted on Harry. "Explain. *Now!*" she barked.

Harry glared at her. "If you go after the Ministry on your own, or drag us into it, you'll be playing right into Fudge's hands. Everything he does is about keeping power. He's possessed by the insane notion that Dumbledore is just lurking in the shadows, ready to seize the reigns of the Ministry and end his career. He's expecting, hell, probably *hoping* for an insurrection of *exactly* this sort. Provides a scapegoat, for one. And it forces the rest of the Ministry, even those that know he's incompetent and a bloody coward, to form ranks beside him."

"Why?" Daphne asked.

Harry's frustration nearly boiled over, and he could hear rattling and clinking as his magic clawed for release, vibrating the very room. He

held it back, just barely. "Do you know what's worse than an incompetent government, Daphne? *No government. Anarchy.* If we give them time to stage a coup, set things up for a smooth and quick transition, they might go along with it. But they won't let the Ministry crumble, no matter who is leading it, and no matter what they do. Order exists because of the Ministry. We're protected from Muggles, who might kill us out of fear, because of the Ministry. Do you think *Rufus Scrimgeour* would stand for that? Much less help you bring down the *only* source of order and stability in this damned world?"

Daphne tried to respond, but couldn't seem to come up with a suitable counterargument. "I'll be in my office," she snapped, and marched out, leaving the others standing around in a state of shock and confusion. Harry made to follow her, but Snape's hand on his shoulder stopped him. He stiffened at first, and then stopped resisting, gently slipping out of the grasp of his Head of House. But he did not run. "Leave her," the older man said quietly, with a hint of something that might just have concern in his voice. "If she is to conquer her demons, she must do it alone."

Harry nodded, though he wasn't sure he agreed. Regardless, it wouldn't do any good to push his guardian at the moment. Indeed, it could do a great deal of harm.

"Harry, perhaps you should rest," Dumbledore said, his voice gentle but firm. "If you are still feeling unwell, I'm sure Madam Pomfrey would be happy to assist you."

Dumbledore was telling him to leave, and Harry took the hint. "I'll be going, then," he said politely. He bowed slightly to his professors, and then left. He'd no sooner descended the spiral staircase and moved through the doorway vacated by the guardian gargoyles then he found himself face-to-face with his girlfriend. "Ginny," he breathed.

"Hey," she said, smiling weakly. "I waited outside for you. I wanted to make sure everything was okay. You scared us all a bit."

"Sorry."

"It's not your fault," Ginny said, keeping her tone as light as possible. It was a side of the redhead he hadn't seen in quite some time.

Something was bothering her...well, beyond the vision he'd just had and its ramifications, anyway. "You weren't in a position to do anything but watch. What did Dumbledore say?"

Harry was thrown off for a moment, but quickly recovered. "He's going to start a few wheels turning, but we can't do anything dramatic for the moment. Things are too fragile, and we've got to move carefully if we want to stack the odds in our favor."

"This world of ours is too bloody complicated," she sighed. "You'd think that with a madman like Voldemort on the loose, it'd be in the interests of everybody not on his side to smash him before he becomes a real threat. Instead we're forced to stand back and appease dozens of differing factions, each of which has a bloated sense of self-importance and holds its own interests above those of wizarding kind in general."

Harry blinked. "Did you rehearse that?"

Ginny smiled slightly. "I had a lot of time to myself while I was waiting for you. Hermione, Neville, and Luna are still with Peter in the library. I sent Blaise their way, and Greengrass too. She seemed more concerned than I expected."

Harry was puzzled as well. "Really? I didn't think she cared about me beyond the threat that she feels I pose to her family's survival."

Ginny shrugged. She opened her mouth a fraction, as if to say something, but then looked at the floor.

"Out with it," Harry snapped, more forcefully than he'd intended. The entire situation had him on edge, and he wanted answers to the myriad of questions that were spiraling through his mind.

Ginny started a bit, "It's just...I was just standing here, waiting, and Daphne came out of Dumbledore's office, looking like...well, looking like she was ready to kill someone. She didn't even seem to notice me; she just shot past me like I wasn't even there. Did something happen to set her off?"

Harry grimaced. "We had an argument. A bad one. I...I said a few things I probably shouldn't have."

"You had a shouting match in front of Dumbledore?" Ginny asked, her eyebrows raising a fraction.

"And Snape and McGonagall," Harry added. "It was a bit more complicated than that, though. Daphne was being irrational, irresponsible. She was suggesting that we take out the Ministry if Fudge doesn't see reason. She was just casually advising Dumbledore to sponsor an operation to rip out the heart of order in the wizarding world. It was madness. It *is* madness."

Ginny had to agree. As fed up as she was with Fudge's cowardice, uprooting the Ministry was not the answer, not by a long shot. If the Ministry fell apart, Voldemort would be able to operate openly *without* fear of coordinated efforts to bring him down. Chaos and confusion were his greatest assets. "What did you say to her?"

Harry hesitated. "I used her father's name. That sort of set her off."

"I see," Ginny said. She pressed her lips together into a thin line. "Harry, how do you think Daphne is doing?"

"What?"

"What's your opinion of her mental state? Have you noticed anything unusual about her behavior? Anything that concerns you?" Ginny's voice was soft and timid, and she was fidgeting nervously.

"Ginny, what in Merlin's name are you talking about? What are you *saying*?" Harry's tone of voice was becoming increasingly defensive, and she could just about *feel* his temper rising.

"Have you noticed *anything* about her?" Ginny asked, a tinge of desperation leaking into her voice. She had hoped that a careful and cautious attempt to bring up the subject might allow her to finally get through to her boyfriend, but things weren't going the way she'd planned.

"She's under a great deal of stress," Harry told her. "She's got a lot to deal with at the moment."

"I think that's true of all of us," Ginny replied. She frowned. "I've just...well, I've just been a bit concerned by what I seen from her of late...even before this row you had."

Harry shook his head. "Ginny, I don't know what you're talking about. Daphne's fine...well, as fine as she ever is. She has her peaks and valleys, just like everyone. I suppose her valleys just tend to be a bit deeper than average. Given what she's gone through, that's hardly surprising."

Ginny had clearly failed, and now it was time to change the subject before she set Harry off. "I was wondering if you might like to go into Hogsmeade tomorrow. I though we might spend a little time together, without any distractions or worries. I think that with everything that's going on, we could both stand to benefit from a respite."

Harry hesitated, but as Ginny guessed, he wasn't going to decline no matter how much the world seemed to be falling apart around them. Ginny had correctly suspected that he was feeling anxious about neglecting her of late, and would look upon this as an opportunity to soothe his feelings of guilt. Perhaps it was a tad manipulative, but they were both Slytherins after all. It came rather naturally to them at this point.

"Sure, I'd love to," Harry said, although his tone of voice didn't exactly match his broad smile. "That's a good idea, Gin."

Ah, he used my pet name, Ginny observed. It had been a while since she'd last heard that. He was *definitely* feeling pressure to treat her more like his girlfriend.

More comfortable now that the conversation was going in a different direction, Ginny allowed herself to relax a bit. In some ways, their relationship was a bit strained, but in other ways she felt confident it was quite strong, and she never doubted Harry's loyalty to her. Well, at least in comparison to other human beings. She had no doubt that Harry's *duties* as Savior of the Whole Bloody Wizarding World more than occasionally took precedence over his duties as a good

boyfriend. Still, it wasn't as though she's really gone into this relationship with the expectation that he'd lavish attention on her whenever she wanted it, and sometimes when she didn't. Harry had made the limits of their relationship very clear, and she still hadn't hesitated.

"You won't believe the amount of work that McGonagall assigned us," Ginny commented, allowing a touch of petulance into her voice.

"You know, I bet that I won't have any problem believing it," he replied with a grin.

Daphne Greengrass was extremely irritated with her Transfiguration professor, but she went to great lengths to keep Professor McGonagall entirely oblivious of that fact. Her tone was polite and respectful, her body was relaxed, and she wore an expression of simple curiosity, as the Head of Gryffindor House explained why the Greengrass heiress's last essay had not met her expectations. She nodded at all the right times, and even got a rare smile out of the old bat when she finished her explanation. Daphne politely thanked the woman, and gracefully exited the classroom.

Inside, *deep* inside, she was fuming. Her essay had been nothing less than exceptional, and her failing, it seemed, was that she had been unwilling to closely follow the simplistic and uninteresting prompt. McGonagall had told them to discuss the concept of Animagi, speculate as to their own possible form (which invited all manner of absurd delusions of grandeur from the dregs of the class), and explain the process through which one gained the ability to transform into an animal at will. Daphne had touched upon all of those points briefly, but the focus of her essay had been what she considered the unjust and overbearing restrictions that the Ministry of Magic had placed on Animagi and potential Animagi in 1756. Predictably, the woman had been appalled by the very idea of all Animagi being unregistered, believing the rubbish that the Ministry spewed about the dangers of criminals that could evade capture if their forms were not known. In Daphne's mind, the number of people that had been prevented from becoming Animagi because they had no desire to be

recorded by the Ministry (in other words, the Dark Wizards and Witches from which she shared her heritage and traditional beliefs) was far greater than the number of potential criminals who could have become Animagi. Only a small percentage of the wizarding population possessed the proper traits. Daphne was entirely uncertain if she was among that select group, although she had every intention to find out.

And so an essay to which she had devoted hours of research and even risked punishment by sneaking into the Restricted Section (hardly her first time, but still) had earned a mark a great deal more mediocre than she knew it deserved. That was why Daphne Greengrass was, simply put, furious.

She fought the urge to let her emotions out even when she was well out of earshot of McGonagall. Daphne's ice-cold reputation commanded her respect, and she was loath to risk that, no matter how angry she was. Besides, this was a matter so trivial in the context of her life that she shouldn't even have allowed the thought to enter her mind. McGonagall's rigid, dogmatic views of the rights of wizards and witches were to be expected, given her upbringing. It was extremely unlikely that she'd be persuaded otherwise by a fifteen-year old Slytherin witch.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him, the realization of which instantly cut off her wayward thoughts. Very few things in this world had that effect on her, but the presence of Theodore Nott was one of them.

Daphne's intellectual fascination with the young man had been long in developing, although the obvious physical attraction she felt had not. Nott was from a powerful, old Dark family, albeit one that had fallen on hard times but still possessed vast wealth, property, and influence in the inner circles of the pureblood community. It was, she felt, a family worthy of marrying their youngest member to the heiress of the Greengrass family. No such arrangement existed, of course, but that was true for both of them.

Nott noticed her, but his expression scarcely changed. Only one with such an acute sense of body language like Daphne could have seen

that the sight of her pleased him, as he walked down the hallway to join her. "Daphne," he said politely. "How does this day find you?"

"Well," she said, irritated by the strange flutter in her heart. *Control yourself, girl.*

"I'm glad to hear it," he said in that smooth, seemingly disinterested voice...one that somehow lacked the chill of Daphne's own tone, a chill that many found unpleasant. In most cases she didn't care; if they could be so easily persuaded to dislike her, it was scarcely worth her time to bother with them. But at this moment, she found herself feeling remarkably envious of the boy in front of her.

She abruptly realized she was wringing her hands, and stopped at once. A flash of anger rose in her for her indiscretion.

"Are you alright?" he asked, sounding a bit concerned. The concern was undoubtedly fake, but only one as trained in picking up minor features of a person's tone such as Daphne could possibly tell.

"Fine," she replied quickly. She hastened to change the subject. "I assume that you have heard what has happened on the Ministry's little prison island," she said. Daphne Greengrass was not so brainless as to attempt to bring up a subject as irrelevant as the weather, which was quite miserable, in any case.

"Indeed," Nott said. "My father seems concerned."

He would be, Daphne thought. His brother is one of the escaped prisoners.

"And you?" she asked, not completely sure why. It wasn't really proper. But Nott didn't seem to take notice of her impropriety, though Daphne herself surely did.

"That the Dark Lord felt prepared enough to strike so openly, at so ambitious a target, it is certainly cause for concern. More alarming, in my mind, is the horrendously delayed response of our elected leaders, who seemed to have missed the memo that informed them that there were several dozen convicted murderers and torturers on the run."

"Their silence is not reassuring," Daphne agreed. "The Ministry cannot be relied to fight until their backs are against the wall, and perhaps not even then."

"So you advocate that we act?" Nott asked. He tilted his head. "Assuming you are dedicated to fighting him, of course."

"Of course we are," Daphne said. "No member of my family will ever serve the Dark Lord. What he did to my mother and sister cannot be forgiven, nor ignored."

"So honor is more important to you than survival? You would fight a battle you could not possibly win, even if joining the enemy might ensure the survival of your bloodline."

Daphne barely hesitated. As displeased as she was with her father's impulsiveness at times, on this matter they were of the same mind. "Yes."

Nott regarded her with an odd look. He was quiet for a moment. "Not many would admit that," he said. "It would seem to run counter to what we've all been told from birth. Honor is important, yes. But of paramount importance is the survival of the family."

"In most cases I might agree with you," Daphne said, a bit of a chill seeping into her voice. "But this is...unusual."

Daphne felt a tad guilty describing the death of two of her immediate family members as *unusual*, but it was the best word she could come up with given the circumstances. And it wasn't necessarily inaccurate.

"I suppose that is true," Theodore said.

"And your family?" Daphne asked.

"I cannot say, not because I do not trust you, but because I do not know myself," he replied slowly. "My father will examine the situation from every possible angle, and he will make his decision in good time. There are more than two options, after all. It is not an, "us or them" situation."

"Perhaps," Daphne said. "Although the Dark Lord may desire to have your allegiance, and leave you little choice in the matter. Your family name is great, known to many, and you have a reputation of producing powerful wizards and witches."

"I thank you for the compliment, Daphne," Nott say, nodding slightly. "But I hope I need not remind you that such decision belong the members of my family alone, and then only to those old enough to weigh the consequences of their actions. If you hope to convince my family to join you in your support of Potter, you had best focus your efforts elsewhere. My father permits me to speak my mind, but he does not particularly encourage it, and in most cases I defer to his superior judgment."

"I'm sorry if I gave the impression I was trying to recruit you, but that wasn't what I intended."

"Nonetheless, it is what I heard, and in the end, that is all that matters, is it not?" Theodore asked, raising an eyebrow. He cleared his throat. "As much as I'd like to discuss this further, I'm afraid that I have to meet someone in fifteen minutes, and would like to be on my way."

"Of course," Daphne said, giving a small bow in deference. Privately she was grateful. Theodore had been well on his way to making an utter fool of her, and her attempt to counter him had merely resulted in a deepening of the hole she was already in.

"Good day, Daphne," he said politely, and strode off, leaving the Greengrass heir frustrated and awed at the same time. She was embarrassed to have been humiliated in such a way, not to mention in front of a young man she greatly admired and...well, *admired* might be putting it a tad lightly. Theodore Nott was handsome, to be sure, and possessed the elegance and dignity of any well-brought-up pureblood heir, but his mind was razor-sharp, and although he spoke little in public, when he did every word that passed his lips had an intent, a purpose. He would have kept the thoughts to himself had they not been of importance.

Daphne was mulling over her defeat when another person came up the corridor. Daphne waited to see who it was before she acted. Upon gaining that information, her response was to go into an

emotional shutdown, wiping any trace of humanity from her expression, replacing it with a detached and indifferent gaze. "Hello Giselle," she said in a polite, but cold voice.

The girl tilted her head to the side, scrutinizing her, pretending as if she hadn't already figured out who had spoken to her. "Ah, Daphne," she said. "What brings you to this part of the castle?"

Daphne didn't bother responding. It was none of her business and she surely knew it. "How are you, Giselle? Is your second year here going well? You now know this castle inside and out, I suspect."

The dark-haired young woman, who had grown out her formerly short black locks until they reached her shoulders, smiled. "Yes, I think I've finally acclimated to living at Hogwarts. It's been nice being able to focus on my studies for a change." Giselle Reisor had joined the Slytherins of Daphne's class the previous year, under rather vague circumstances.

"I imagine it would be," Daphne replied, the politeness in her tone strained. "You've heard about Azkaban, I take it?" she asked cautiously.

"Oh, but of course, who hasn't?" she said, her voice filled with a bit of alarm. "My father expressed outrage in his latest letter about the sheer incompetence that has taken hold of the Ministry. That security was so poor in one of the most important places under Ministry control is simply appalling. It makes you wonder if He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named might dare to strike at us here. Is anywhere truly safe?"

Oh, that's cute, Daphne thought cynically. Her interactions with the Reisor girl had been rather limited, but every time she encountered the quiet young woman, she got a different impression. This time it sounded like she was talking to a...*Hufflepuff*. But no Hufflepuff knew the sorts of the things that Reisor had demonstrated she had knowledge of in their past conversations.

It was plainly obvious to Daphne that not only was Giselle hiding who and what she really was, but that she was remarkably good at it, almost as if she had been trained for that very purpose. Yet though she was not anywhere near as innocent as she had pretended to be

during the last few minutes, Daphne didn't sense any malicious intent or dark motives behind what she did and what she said. That irritated her. Profusely.

As they said their formal goodbyes and went their separate ways, Daphne found herself reminded yet again of the reason she so disliked Giselle Rosier.

The bloody girl was better at it than she was.

Gods, in my wildest, most absurd dreams, I could never have seen this coming.

Sirius Black stood at the threshold of a room that had seen maybe three visitors since his parents had passed away, following their favored son into the Abyss, and leaving Sirius as the last member of what had once been a proud and prestigious family, now reduced to shadowy ruins by inbreeding and illicit activity. Actually, as he thought about it, he became all the more certain that beyond himself (however reluctant he'd been), his Godson, and without question Kreacher, who made it his business to go where Sirius didn't want him to go and do things that Sirius make it clear he didn't want him doing, no living soul had entered this haunted, yet eerily preserved, bedchamber that once belonged to Regulus Arcturus Black.

He'd been beyond enraged when he'd pushed open the door and found his Godson admiring some of the more lethal trinkets that his brother had collected over the years. His attention had been caught by the fact that the door, which he kept locked at all times (not that it stopped Kreacher) was clearly ajar. He'd expected to find Snape, or if not his archrival Dumbledore or Daphne, poking around the room in some bizarre quest to learn more about a man Sirius wanted to remain a part of the past. As it turned out, he'd gotten the motives for entering the room right. He'd just underestimated the boldness and curiosity of his Godson.

What am I doing here? he asked himself for the fifth time since he had sat up straight on a couch in the library, made his decision, put

down the book he'd been perusing and made his way up to this place. *Just let the dead be, Sirius*, a part of him hissed.

But he could not do that. When his anger over Harry's transgressions had faded, when several days of intermittent contemplation following the young man's departure had sent his mood all over the map, from despondent to furious to disappointed to accepting and back again to grief, he'd finally decided that if he were to have any chance at having the kind of relationship, he had to entertain the possibility that Harry was right about Regulus, and about the Dark in general, and that he was wrong. . His heart-to-heart exchange with his best friend and one of the only men he truly trusted had opened the door to such an epiphany, but as Remus had surely known, it would take more than that for Sirius to overcome a lifetime of assumptions, biases, and gut instincts. He'd asked himself more than once if it was all worth it. Was Harry *that* important? Did Sirius have to rip his life apart, shred his core beliefs, and rearrange his very mindset for one young man?

And the answer he came to, without fail, often without hesitation, was yes.

Still, the decision that had led him to this particular spot had been made much later; Harry had been at Hogwarts for months, and Sirius had seen precious little of his best friend as Dumbledore had tasked him with gathering intelligence and planting the seeds of alliance with the werewolves.

Sirius hadn't been alone; 12 Grimmauld Place was the Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix, after all. Order members had come and gone, making use of the vast number of bedrooms available. As it was one of the most secure places in Britain, besides perhaps Hogwarts, and far less high-profile, the Order did much of its planning here, including the weekly meetings. Sirius was on good terms with most of the Order, and had a few friendships that dated back to the last war, although his conviction and sentence in Azkaban had strained some of those ties. Hestia Jones, when she wasn't working her arse off in a job that paid her far less than she deserved, would keep him company on occasion. Still, far too often he found himself left to his own devices.

Sirius took a deep breath, and stepped into the room.

There were ghosts here. Not the kind of magical ghosts that could be seen, heard, and spoken to, but the haunted traces of past events, past conversations, past emotions preserved long after the voices had faded. Sirius shivered a bit, even though his brother's bedroom was about the same temperature as the rest of Black Manor. He could almost hear his brother's voice, and that sensation brought a burden of memories he'd kept hidden for decades, save when they were ripped out of him by the Dementors. Regulus and he had never been all that close, even when Sirius had been too young to understand the concept of Light and Dark. Regulus had been the studious one, the one up late at night, the one that earned top marks and never got into trouble. Some of his fellow Death Eater acolytes had been troublemakers or bullies in their school days. Regulus hadn't been a part of anything remotely unsavory before he'd finally chosen his allegiance. He'd received Dark Arts training from his father, of course, and taken to it, but in hindsight, Sirius couldn't remember any particularly vicious or ruthless behavior that might have marked him as anything besides another follower.

Maybe he wasn't as bad as I always told myself he was.

The floorboards creaked as he moved deeper into the room. His eyes moved over the collection of various trinkets and possessions Regulus had put in the glass display cabinet.

The items in there ranged from the daggers that had attacked Harry to various souvenirs and antiques that Regulus had discovered and collected over the years. He turned away. Some of those items brought up memories he'd rather leave in the past.

On one of the bookshelves, he spotted another such item. It was a framed picture, caked with layers of dust, but familiar enough that Sirius recognized it instantly. It was taken when he was seven years old and Regulus was a tender five. They smiled and waved at the camera, and Sirius was trying to say something to his father while Regulus elbowed him to stay still and silent. They were dressed in miniature formal robes, but the setting was their shared bedroom. Sirius had insisted that his younger brother sleep in the same room

with him from the moment he was born, and his parents had given in, figuring it might be easier to keep track of Sirius, who was admittedly the at-times troublesome child of the two, if the two spent much of their time together. It had been about a year after the picture had been taken that Sirius asked for, and received, his own room, and Regulus had been moved to the room in which he was currently standing.

Sirius reached out and touched the image, brushing away over a decade of dust. There was a flash of light, and he leapt backwards in surprise. The image warped, and the smiling faces of Regulus and Sirius were replaced by a moving image of a hooded figure. Sirius was transfixed as the figure brought his hands back and drew back the hood of his cloak. It revealed Regulus, now fully grown and looking much as he did the last time Sirius ever saw him alive.

What is this?

Regulus smiled slightly, and then sighed. *"Hello Sirius,"* he said in a light voice. *"I don't know if you'll ever see this...I wouldn't be all that surprised if you never laid eyes on this particular picture again. And given the way Mum and Dad booted you out of the house, I suppose I wouldn't blame you."*

Sirius sat down, hard, landing with a soft thud on the wooden floor, his eyes wide, his mind racing.

"I'm sure that if you do see this, you'll probably have a hard time believing it's really me." The image of Regulus chuckled. *"I'm not sure how to reassure you that what you are seeing isn't a trick of some kind. I mean, I know I'm real, but that doesn't really matter, does it? Let's see...is there anything I could say that only I would know...well, I'm not sure I ever apologized for wetting the bed that time Black Manor was packed to the gills with friends of Mum and Dad. So I'd like to do that. I probably won't get another chance."*

Another sigh. *"There's not much point in skirting around this. I'm probably going to be dead, quite soon. I made a mistake, Siri. I followed the path our parents pushed me down, and I thought I was doing the right thing, honoring our family's traditions, our Dark heritage, all that rubbish. I guess I never really allowed myself to*

consider what exactly the occupation of Death Eater entailed. I probably shouldn't have been so thoughtless."

"You see, Siri, two days ago, we raided a small wizarding hamlet in Yorkshire, place called Cobbler's End. It was a pretty straightforward mission. A few folks had gotten on the Dark Lord's bad side, and we were ordered to make them pay for their transgressions...look, Siri, I've never liked killing. I'm not cut out for it. In the heat of battle, when you are fighting for your life, that's one thing. But to kill in cold blood...it just requires a kind of ruthlessness I just didn't have in me. Plenty of chaps here do. I seen people that seem quite reasonable when you're chatting with them do some dreadful things to their fellow man."

"We descended in the dead of night; nobody saw us coming. We knew where they lived, and we had them outside, begging for their lives, inside of twenty minutes. I think they'd already killed a witch for resisting, but that was to be expected. I was ready to see these men and women executed, maybe tortured beforehand. I'd -seen it before, and while I didn't like it, I always told myself that I was on the right side. I had been taught to believe that we were better than Muggles and Muggleborns. And to an extent, I still do. But I don't think they are subhuman. I don't think we have the right to butcher them like animals. We should be the leaders of this world, Siri. It's the way things have always been. The Ministry is corrupt, powerless, constantly taking power away from the families that have earned it through centuries of upholding our way of life. If the Muggleborns want to be part of our society, they've got to play by our rules. It's just the way things are."

For an instant, the righteous anger that had led Sirius him to detest his brother for so long returned. He was a bigot, a pureblood supremacist. He was *admitting* it. But then Regulus continued.

"Oh, I really shouldn't be saying this. You might get fed up and stop listening, and I really don't want that. I don't want to die knowing there isn't any chance you might forgive me, you might believe that if I was...well, misguided, in your opinion, I still was a good man. I don't think there's anyone else in this world that could appreciate it like you might, even value it."

"We killed the targets, put a few of them through the Cruciatus Curse before the end. Like I said, I'd expected it. I just stood by and watched. I can do the Unforgivables, it's practically a requirement, but I've never used them on another human being since...well, since I was forced to torture and kill a Muggle to prove my loyalty to the cause. I've never forgiven myself for that, Siri. You shouldn't either."

"But our leader this night was our cousin, lovely old Bellatrix, and she wasn't satisfied by the death we'd already caused. I think she was winged by that woman we killed for fighting back. She was in a sour mood. She ordered the inhabitants of the hamlet to be taken from their homes, gathered in the center of the village...and then..." Regulus looked away. *"We slaughtered them. I can still hear them screaming. We gutted some, set fire to others, made some watch as their families died horribly. I think there were some rapes. We spared no one. I killed a few, because my courage was questioned, and my loyalty...but I didn't make them suffer. I used the Killing Curse. Bellatrix...she was a woman possessed by something terrible. She...crucified this eight-or-nine year old, stabbed him with metal shrapnel through the hands and feet against the wall of his house. Then they set the whole hamlet on fire. That kid was still alive...oh Merlin, Siri, the screams..."*

Regulus stared straight into Sirius's eyes. *"I already had my doubts. This wasn't the first time I'd seen horrible things done to innocent people. But this...there was no reason, no decent reason for doing that to those people. They didn't deserve to die, much less to suffer as they did. I cried that night, Siri. And when I was done, I decided that I'd made a mistake. I decided that I couldn't keep doing this. But the thing is, Siri, you don't just leave the Dark Lord's service. Not while you are still breathing, anyway. I'm going to have to fight my way out. I doubt Dumbledore would have me. And I want to make the people I once called comrades pay for what they've done. I want justice for that kid who we let burn to death, pinned up like that...oh Gods I want justice, Siri. Even if it costs me my life, it's better than living with those memories, that guilt."*

"I guess this is the end. Thanks for hearing me out, brother. I really do care about you, even if I didn't show it. Maybe I was too proud. Maybe I was too convinced that I was better than you. Well, I guess I

was wrong. Sorry it took me that long to figure it out. But nobody's perfect."

He smiled, and the image faded back to its original appearance.

Sirius stared at that image for maybe ten minutes. A tear finally tracked down his face, falling off his chin to splash on the ground. More tears followed. Unable to hold back a tsunami of emotion, Sirius collapsed to the ground, sobbing uncontrollably. How could he have been so *stupid*?

Oh Merlin, Reggie, how did you die? What happened to you? Did you take some of them with you?

Knowing his brother, Sirius found the likelihood that he'd done the latter to be more than a little probable.

A young woman, dressed in a hooded black robe, made her way down one of the narrow, dark streets of Rothenberg ob der Tauber. Her steps were light, barely even audible despite the silence around her. In the wee hours of the morning, the quaint town, nestled in the northwest corner of Bavaria, slept. She strode confidently; she had been here before, wandering the streets of Rothenberg in the dead of night, en route to the most clandestine of gatherings. She'd been in Germany for about a month now, and she'd established herself as a Dark Witch looking for a cause to serve. She'd talked to the right people, slowly working her way up from sympathizers to recruiters to actual members of Voldemort's operation on the continent. Now she was on her way to a certain tavern near the center of the walled town, where a Portkey was waiting to take her to an undisclosed location. She'd been waiting weeks for this day, and she was every bit as excited as a would-be-neophyte Death Eater should be for the opportunity she was being given.

The tavern was essentially indistinguishable from the houses surrounding it. It was of mixed brick and wood construction, virtually unchanged from when the foundations had been laid in Medieval times. She knocked twice.

A lock was unlatched, but the door remained shut. Taking the cue, she pushed gently, and the door swung open. It took her a moment to adjust to the bright interior of the tavern. The door was closed behind her.

Four men and one woman were visible to her. One of the men, a taller one with a well-trimmed beard, moved closer. He spoke in German. It was a language that had always fascinated the young woman, despite its crude guttural qualities. She'd taught it to herself while she was still attending Hogwarts. One of her Slytherin classmates had been of Austrian birth, and coached her on the more subtle aspects of the language.

"So, you've come."

"I have made my decision," she replied smoothly. "I wish to join the ranks of Lord Voldemort, and I pledge my life to his cause."

The man gave her a small smile. "All in good time, my dear Anja. I am in no position to accept your oath of loyalty. But your time will come, this I promise you. Have you put your affairs in order? Will you be missed by anyone?"

"I have left everything behind," Annabelle Wright replied. "I am ready."

"Many have said that before," the woman, who was probably ten or twenty years her senior, said softly. "I would advise you to find your humility before we bring you before our superiors. You are *nothing*. The quicker you understand that, the better, and the faster you will be a useful servant of our Lord."

"I am sorry," "Anja" said, averting her eyes. "I did not mean to appear arrogant, or presumptive. I am sorry that my enthusiasm got the better of me."

"Be lenient with the young woman, Katharine," the older man said.

"She should know what she's getting into," she argued.

"I am aware of the risks," Anja assured them. "But I consider the honor of serving the Dark Lord more than worth the danger."

"We should go now," one of the other men said. "They will be expecting us. You have traveled by Portkey before?"

Anja had, many times. "Of course. How far are we going?"

"You don't need to know that," the woman said.

Anja shrugged. "As you wish."

"Klemens, bring it out," the older man said.

Anja shrugged. One of the other men came forward, carrying a short wooden staff, which emitted a faint blue glow. "Please take hold of the Portkey, miss," the oldest one said. She did, and her hand was joined by those of the remaining four. They waited in silence for about a minute. Abruptly the floor fell away, as a hook latched onto a spot behind her navel. After a brief sensation akin to being in a wind tunnel, her feet hit the ground. She stumbled, but managed not to fall.

They'd landed in hilly countryside, Anja saw, possibly in Bavaria, possibly not even in Germany. The older man gestured for her to follow them, and she did. She wasn't sure what was going on until she felt the sensation of passing through an invisible barrier. At that instant, a bizarre scene was unveiled before her eyes. Scores of people were arrayed around a bright bonfire, reminding her of sketches of pagan ceremonies she'd seen in some books about early wizarding society.

They moved closer. Most of the crowd was dressed in black; she saw a wide range of ages, physical appearances, and only a slight gender imbalance. The last she found surprising. To be sure, a fair number of women did join Voldemort's ranks, but overall there was a noticeable majority of men.

A middle-aged man with bright eyes and a jagged scar on his right cheek was speaking. Well, *shrieking* described it a bit better.

"...they burned our cities! They murdered our children! We were the victims of a war that we had forsaken! They wished to wipe us out forever, to erase our society from the earth, because they were frightened of us!"

“The Dark Lord has taken up the noble cause of Grindelwald. He intends to tear down our corrupt governments, put Muggles and their spawn in their place, and allow the righteous among us to claim their deserved seat of leadership.”

The speaker was getting a rise out of the crowd now. Anja wasn't hearing anything she hadn't expected, though she did her best to appear awed and gleeful at finally being given the opportunity.

“Are you ready to serve our Lord? It will require great sacrifice. You may be asked to leave your families, your friends, your very lives behind. You may be asked to give your life for the cause, so that the promises of freedom and vengeance for the crimes the Muggles have committed against us may be brought to realization. Are you ready to give all that you have in service to the Dark Lord?”

There was an explosion of enthusiastic cheering from those who felt quite confident they were willing to do everything the Dark Lord asked of them. Anja thrust her arm in the air, screaming like the rest of them.

But even as she cried in triumph, a cold lump formed in her stomach. This was just one rally, held over a year after Bellatrix Lestrange had begun setting up training camps and recruiting able-bodied men and women possessed of bitter anger towards the Muggles. They had realized the implications for the numbers of capable fighters the Dark Lord might eventually have at his disposal, but the horrifying reality had never hit Annabelle until that moment. At that moment, it did, threatening to bowl her over.

Most of the men and women before her would not ultimately become trained Death Eaters. Many would be turned away, some would lose their nerve, and some would be killed in the process of training. But there would be survivors. Some of these people would become part of the Dark Lord's armies. These were just the latest batch. It was impossible that the number of Death Eaters recruited from the German heartland had not already surpassed the number of Aurors employed by the Ministry. And this was just one country.

Merlin, there could be thousands of them. Even if they aren't of the caliber of the ones that served in the last war, with these numbers it barely matters.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" one of the younger men asked her. He was quite handsome, with the cropped blond hair and pale blue eyes of a stereotypical German.

"Yes, it is," she said, filling her voice with awe. "Have you received the Mark already?"

He nodded. "May I see it?" she asked.

He pulled back the sleeve on his left forearm, and the skull and serpent of Voldemort's Dark Mark stared menacingly back at her. "I received it two months ago. I don't think I've ever felt so mighty, so invincible in my life. I have a good feeling about you. You'll make it."

"Your words are kind," she said breathlessly, staring out over the delirious crowd. Her attention wasn't focused on the young man who was obviously more than a little interested in her. Rather, her mind was desperately trying to hold back the waves of anxiety, panic, and even despair that threatened to overwhelm her.

So many...

Andromeda Tonks checked the hallway for anyone that might prove to be a problem, saw none, and closed the door to Amelia Bones' office. She turned back to see a spectacular display of power, influence, and prestige within Light wizardry. Their little rebellious cadre had grown since its last meeting, though Smith was absent due to official circumstances; he was currently in France, negotiating with the France Ministry of Magic on Cornelius Fudge's behalf. Rufus Scrimgeour was also absent, but his whereabouts were unknown. Andromeda was a bit concerned, though not overly so.

Joining Bones, Drake, Stoutheart, and Kendrick were two new faces, a tall woman with graying auburn hair named Catherine Morrow, who had replaced Alexander Smith as the Head Coordinator of the Obliviators and was quite loyal to the man, and a rather unexpected guest, dressed in the dark purple robes and thin, black dragon-hide gloves of his profession. He was young, probably in his late 20s. That wasn't really quite so remarkable, although he was easily the

youngest person in the room now that her daughter Nymphadora had left.

No, the *really* remarkable part was that he was an Unspeakable, a well-placed member of the Ministry's most secretive and clandestine department. Andrew Wright spent his working hours (which were longer than most employed by the Ministry) as a member of the Department of Mysteries.

The man looked somewhat nervous to be standing in the same room with so many of the movers and shakers of the Ministry of Magic, but he concealed his unease well. Brilliant by all accounts, with a creative mind and a good sense of humor, Wright was not in his element at the moment. Andromeda pitied him; she'd grown to appreciate and even enjoy her role as a silent and mostly ignored observer, but it had taken some getting used to. Wright fidgeted with his robes as she closed the door.

As soon as the sound had faded away, Amelia Bones spoke. Her voice was subdued, "Good day to all of you. The events of the past few weeks have, to an extent, confirmed some of our worst fears. Lord Voldemort has struck openly, and so far there has been no response from our elected leader but denial and obfuscation. Everyone knows about the breakout from Azkaban, but not a single article concerning it has run in the *Daily Prophet*. Our citizens, those not blinded by the propaganda of the Minister, have been forced to rely on such disreputable sources as *The Quibbler* to get anything resembling accurate news. We have been silent for too long. We must act, before Fudge's cowardice costs us everything."

The room was silent, but no one was hurrying to defend the Minister. What they were talking about, what Amelia had just suggested, was treason, pure and simple. Still, no one seemed willing to speak. Drake finally broke the silence, sounding more than a little horrified. "Amelia, do you have any idea what you are suggesting? This is treason! We cannot go down this path."

"I know exactly what it is that I am suggesting, Jericho," Amelia replied crisply. "I am deeply saddened that it has come to this, but we have no other choice. Right now, Cornelius Fudge might be Lord

Voldemort's most powerful ally. That is unacceptable. I will not gamble the lives of thousands of our people on the chance that our sad little minister will grow a spine. Am I alone? Is there anyone else who is willing to speak up and help me do what must be done?"

There was silence for only a moment before the proud, stubborn Heather Stoutheart stood up straight. "You will have my support. We have already waited too long to act. I fear the consequences will be great, but I cannot watch innocent people die and know that I could have done something to prevent it."

Andromeda studied the others in the room. Amelia sent a pointed look at Harold Kendrick, who sighed almost imperceptibly before pledging his support. "I have been your friend and ally through the years, Amelia, and I would not abandon you now. It is time to act."

Her boss smiled at her old friend. A few glances were thrown at the young Unspeakable, who shrugged. "I don't reckon I'd be here if I didn't think she was absolutely right."

"You can be an invaluable resource to us, Andrew," Amelia said in a kindly tone. "You have access to the kind of information that we will need to push Fudge out of power, and repair the damage he has already done. I cannot promise any compensation, except that of a clean conscience."

"Ma'am, I didn't come here expecting anything more than your gratitude. I'll do what I can," he replied earnestly. Andromeda thought his obvious discomfort with being the object of the attention of the Head of Magic Law Enforcement was quite adorable. Still, she'd overheard enough conversations to know that as awkward and naïve as he might appear, when his gifted mind was allowed to work comfortable, the results were truly remarkable. His position in the Unspeakables, who had access to all kinds of potentially vital information, was just a bonus, and a big one at that.

Amelia smiled back at him, and then she turned her attention to their other newcomer. "You told me yesterday that you were willing to consider all options. Can I count on your support, Catherine? If you are not willing to go through with this, I suggest you leave before you

learn anything more about this conspiracy that might be used against you.”

The woman shook her head, her eyes cold and hard. “Amelia, my son died on Azkaban. I’m dead certain of it. Now the Ministry, which has yet to send word on his status, is trying to cover their arse and wipe the blood of my son and his comrades off their hands. I cannot abide by that. I will not allow my son to have died in vain.”

“Thank you, Catherine,” Amelia said quietly, her voice full of sincerity and compassion. Andromeda was certain that of all the witches and wizards in Britain, few knew what it was like to lose a loved one without apparent cause or advanced warning better than Madam Bones.

All eyes turned to Jericho Drake, standing tall and silent in the corner of the room. “You cannot ask me to do this,” he said. “I implore all of you to take a step back and consider what it is you are doing. This is treason in a time of war. You could be executed for this.”

“Thanks to our exalted Minister, we are not officially at war,” Stoutheart said sharply. “And I have faced great risk in my life before. So have you, Jericho.”

“Yes, I have, but that was different. You are talking about uprooting the very foundations of magical government, even as we face possible extinction!”

“That extinction will come if we do nothing. If we act, we may yet prevent it,” Amelia said in a commanding tone. “Jericho, I would never accuse you of cowardice. Your record speaks for itself. But I cannot help but question where your loyalties truly lie.”

“Perhaps you are right to do so, then,” Jericho said abruptly. There was a hint of regret in his eye, and Andromeda had a sudden feeling of dread, even before he spoke the word. “Downfall.”

At that instant, before any of them could react, the heavy door to Amelia’s office was blown inward. Four men and women wearing the red uniforms of the Aurors pushed into the room, wands drawn. Unfazed, Stoutheart and Kendrick quickly drew their own wands.

Amelia remained silent and motionless, her eyes locked with those of the figure that followed his shock troops into the office. He was followed by a short, plump woman who could make Andromeda's blood boil at the very sight of her. Two more Aurors followed her in. Andromeda could see even more of them crowded outside in the hallway. Fudge, if he hadn't been expecting a fight, was certainly prepared for one.

"What is the meaning of this, Cornelius?" Amelia demanded, her voice strong and defiant.

"Don't play *games* with me, Amelia," Fudge spat. "Did you really think you could plot my downfall in secret? You may think me blind, but I am not stupid, nor deaf."

Dolores Umbridge cleared her throat. "*Hem hem.*" She smiled nastily. "You are *all* under arrest for conspiracy to commit treason, conspiracy to spread public panic, and conspiracy to destabilize the Ministry of Magic. You will be taken into custody, and your wands confiscated. You will be provided with legal counsel if you cannot afford you own – although I doubt that will be a problem for most of you...ah, yes, Mr. Wright, I should add you are also being charged with conspiracy to reveal Ministry secrets, violation of your oath of silence as an Unspeakable, and a few other things of that general nature."

Andrew Wright was pale as a ghost, and practically shaking under the withering glare of the Senior Undersecretary to the Minister of Magic. Andromeda felt her heart racing as well. She was about to be arrested. Thrown into jail. *Merlin, Bellatrix is going to be rolling on the floor when she hears of this.*

"I am most disappointed in all of you," Fudge said, almost sounding remorseful. "I had heard *rumors* of clandestine meetings and the like, but I didn't want to believe it. After all I've done for all of you, it is truly *painful* to see you turn on me like this."

"Oh shut it you whimpering *bastard!*" Heather Stoutheart screeched. "Save us the bloody stump speech."

"Control yourself, Miss Stoutheart, or extreme measures may have to be taken to ensure the safety of the Minister," Umbridge added. Her

high-pitched voice sounded about an octave higher than normal, and the sheer bliss on her face made Andromeda want to vomit.

"It's not worth it, Heather," Amelia said quietly. She turned her blazing gaze to Fudge. "Do you really think this is the end, Cornelius? Do you think that you can arrest several senior members of the Ministry for treason without the truth getting out? Do you really believe that we are the *only* ones that cannot stand your cowardice any longer?"

"There are more of you, I'm sure, though Mr. Drake has outright refused to aid in the arrest of anyone not caught in the act of conspiracy. We will find them. And when we do, they will be removed and charged accordingly." Fudge scoffed. "I can't believe you, Amelia! Can you truly think so little of me to believe that I have simply *ignored* the threat of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named? I have been a very busy man. I don't want to see innocent blood shed yet again, Amelia-

"It's a little late for that," Catherine hissed.

"-so I've decided to seek a more *peaceful* and *permanent* solution. We have opened negotiations with the forces of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, and by extension, all of the Dark families in the whole of Britain. We have kept them down, taken their rights, and assumed our ideological supremacy for too long."

Amelia's face was utterly emotionless, but her eyes betrayed a seething anger. "You. Bloody. Fool. Can I even begin to count the ways? Your ignorance is leading us down the path to disaster! *Negotiate* with *Voldemort*? Are you utterly, raving mad?"

"Just because you have not thought of it before, Amelia, does not make it the idea of a madman," Fudge retorted, his face darkening with rage.

"No, I suppose that particular form of insanity has eluded me to this point. Clearly, it has taken you instead. Voldemort does *not* stand for all of the Dark families."

"Not now, but he will," Fudge insisted. "He is their Lord, their rightful leader. In time, they will see things his way. We *can* coexist, Amelia.

You will see in time.” He turned to the Aurors. “Take them into custody. We will decide where they will be kept later.”

One of the female Aurors boldly walked up to Heather and Harold. It was Sarah McGlinchy, one of Fudge’s pets, and a downright nasty woman, in Andromeda’s experience. “Your wands, please,” she ordered. James Dawlish, another one of Fudge’s longtime allies, and the bane of Rufus Scrimgeour’s existence, also approached, providing backup in case it was needed. It wasn’t. Heather disgustingly hurled her wand off into a corner, while Harold began to gently hand it over before almost trying to impale Dawlish with it, staggering him. “Now the rest of you,” McGlinchy snapped.

Andromeda drew her wand out of her robes, and held her hand out for Amelia’s. She wasn’t there. She had come out from behind her desk, shoved her way through the stunned Aurors, and wound up with her face no more than inches away from that of her Minister. She thrust her wand into his hands. “The heavens forgive you, Cornelius. I know that I shall not.”

After that display, they were fitted with magical restraints and led down the hall, surrounded by Aurors, a spectacle for the dumbstruck Ministry workers poking their heads out to see what the ruckus was about.

Andromeda didn’t see a small figure, dressed in nondescript black robes, flattened against a wall on one of the side corridors, shaking with fear, excitement, and adrenaline at what she had just overheard and seen.

Nymphadora Tonks watched in horror as her mother and the others were led away. She had to conceal herself again when Dolores Umbridge stopped abruptly, searching for unwanted observers such as the young Auror. Satisfied there were none, she continued, humming a bright tune under her breath.

Jericho Drake came after her, looking exhausted and drained. But he had the look of a man who had done something difficult, but nonetheless was still convinced he’d made the right decision.

And that told young Nymphadora all she needed to know.

A/N: Lots of things happening here. A great deal of the early part of Sacrifice has been build-up, and here's where you can see GMS really diverging from OotP.

Sirius is in the midst of a massively important transformation here. I tried not to make Regulus a clone of him who made the wrong choices. Regulus held certain beliefs that Sirius does not share. Still, without the horacruxes, I wanted a way to redeem him, and use his redemption as a vehicle to transform Sirius's worldview. I think it worked.

If I have any regrets, one of them might be using the name "Daphne" for two main characters. By the time I realized it was a mistake, it was too late to turn back. So bear with me.

It's really easy to write corrupt Fudge. Ditto cowardly Fudge. So I went with self-interested/delusional Fudge. Drake's betrayal should indicate just how restrictive the bound of conduct in the wizarding world are.

Dolores hath returned.

Rothenburg is an amazing little city in southern Germany that I visited last year during my spring break. As I described in the story, it's almost entirely preserved from the middle ages, all the more remarkable given that significant damage was done to it by an Allied bombing raid during WWII. Interesting, the American commander of the troops in the region ordered his men to refrain from using artillery bombardment on the town, because he was aware of its historic importance. Walking along the walls (well, essentially inside them) is a pretty incredible experience. It felt like a fun place to put some of Voldemort's grassroots organizers.

Hopefully the next chapter arrives sooner.

Thanks for the reviews and for bearing with me.

Chapter 10: Backlash

Harry wasn't taken by surprise when he picked up the *Daily Prophet* the next morning as he sat down to eat breakfast. The reason for that was the hastily scribbled note tucked into his pocket that he'd received the previous evening in the middle of Transfiguration. McGonagall hadn't been particularly pleased, but after she'd asked Harry to stay behind, and he'd gotten a chance to show her the contents, her anger was rapidly re-directed. Harry had quickly spread the word to the rest of his close friends, but decided to let the others find out on their own. As he'd guessed, this was one matter that Fudge wanted nothing more than to have splashed across the front page.

Harry,

Mum's just been arrested. Bones, Stoutheart, and a couple of other blokes too. They've been charged with conspiracy and all kinds of treason. Fudge was talking about negotiating with Voldemort. He's nutters. Scrimgeour's not here. Dunno why. Didn't see Smith either. Drake sold them out. Never liked him.

Tell Dumbledore.

Tonks

Written by a hand that was practically dancing across the paper, jittery as all hell, and producing writing that was barely legible, Harry hadn't even recognized Tonks' distinctive handwriting, lacking as it was all of its unnecessary loops and curls added for no other reason but that she liked to draw them.

The headline stood out in big bold letters, dominating the front page. It was, predictably, horribly misleading.

**COUP IN THE MINISTRY!
PLOT TO OVERTHROW MINISTER THWARTED!**

**BONES, KENDRICK, OTHERS ARRESTED. MINISTER
"SHOCKED"**

Harry didn't even bother to read the article; he already had enough to be angry about on this day. He glanced around the Great Hall and noticed his girlfriend doing the same thing. Harry watched in fascination as his schoolmates began to absorb the news, talking in excited whispers as they passed the *Prophet* along. The noise level in the Great Hall steadily rose from dead silence and a cold chill seemed to descend upon those gathered. Nothing about it was related to the frosty late November weather. Harry saw Susan Bones, who was being bombarded with hostile looks and questions, get up from her seat at the Hufflepuff table and not quite storm out. Still, she was visibly upset. Given that her primary caretaker had just been arrested, it was difficult not to blame her. Harry was still stunned that Fudge had gone that far. And if this nonsense about Fudge opening negotiations with Voldemort, treating him as an equal for all intents and purposes, was really true, Harry was more than a little terrified of what was to come. Scrimgeour had escaped, whether by foreknowledge or blind chance, and was yet to be seen. Alexander Smith had also not been mentioned, which was good. That meant there were two figures powerful enough and influential enough to challenge Fudge. But what was to say the Minister wouldn't go ahead and haul them in on fabricated charges?

He felt a hand on his arm, and turned his head. Ginny was staring back at him, her brown eyes shining with emotion. "Go to her," she whispered. "You owe her that much."

Harry had to agree, and rose, letting Ginny's hand slip out of his and followed Susan out of the Great Hall. He felt the stares follow him out as well, but didn't look back.

Susan hadn't gone far, fortunately. She was standing a few meters from the staircase in the Entrance Hall, her back turned to him. Harry approached slowly, but made no effort to hide his presence. She didn't react, but he was fairly certain she knew someone was there. "I suppose the only thing I can say is that I'm sorry," Harry said in a subdued tone.

"Sorry for what, exactly?" Susan asked sharply, turning to face him. Her eyes were red, though she wasn't crying any longer. "Sorry for

leading my aunt down a path to political suicide? Sorry for taking my last living relative away from me?”

“Susan, I never asked your aunt to remove Fudge. She did that because she believed it was the right thing to do. If what I’ve been hearing recently about Fudge’s activities is accurate, then I support her choice wholeheartedly.”

“She didn’t act until after I’d sent that letter, until after you’d manipulated me to make me lose my composure and someone managed to convince me you were actually contrite. I should have never trusted you, Potter. I’m not sure why I ever thought you were worthy of our loyalty.”

Harry searched for a response, but came up empty.

Susan glared at him. “Potter, I think you mean well. I think you have our best interests at heart, or at least believe that you do. But you are a bloody teenager. No one is going to listen to you, and if they are foolish enough to follow your lead they are going to get hurt. Leave this to the adults. I understand what you’ve been through, but you don’t know what you are doing.”

Harry fought back a surge of anger from the remarks, recognizing in his heart that Susan was only telling him what she perceived as the truth. “Susan, I’m not going to ask you to trust me, much less to like me. I’m sorry for what’s happened, and I suppose that some of it might be my fault. I’m not even going to try to justify myself to you.”

“Then what are you doing?” she demanded.

“I’m telling you that this is just the start. Things are going to get worse. How deep the chasm goes rides on how long Fudge is allowed to guide the Wizarding world down a path to utter destruction.”

“Potter, how can you possibly know that? I realize that things aren’t going well, and that You-Know-Who’s running around with nobody trying to stop him, but you make it sound like Judgment Day is coming.”

Harry frowned. "Judgment Day?" That was a term he hadn't heard before.

"Some religious Muggles believe that at some point in the future the end of the world will come, and everyone that's ever lived will be held accountable for their actions...what I'm trying to say is that I think you might be overstating the point."

There was a knock at the door, and Cornelius Fudge looked up from the report he was skimming. The door opened, and Sarah McGlinchy stepped through. She looked particularly attractive today, the Minister of Magic thought. He'd always had a thing for brunettes, even though his wife, Elizabeth, was a blonde. That marriage had been one of political convenience. That wasn't to say he wasn't fond of her; she was kind, intelligent, and most importantly, knew her place. But Cornelius felt no real love for her, and she most likely knew it. He honestly wasn't sure what his wife felt for him, though he guessed it to be stronger than his own feelings.

"Yes, Sarah?" he asked. He tilted his head. "I must say, you look quite beautiful today."

The veteran Auror smiled bashfully and nodded. Just as quickly, she regained her composure. "Lucius Malfoy is here to see you, sir."

Fudge frowned. "Lucius? Why now?"

"He didn't say, sir. He just said that it was urgent. He seems quite angry about something."

Cornelius considered that. It took him two seconds to realize there were only a few things that might cause Lucius Malfoy to be angry with him at this present time. As much as he wanted at that moment to have Sarah tell the man he wasn't available, he didn't feel it worth the risk. "Very well, send him in. Oh, Sarah, I was wondering...when do you get off duty?"

"When you do, sir. I have no official business for the Aurors today." She smiled playfully.

Fudge returned her smile. "Why don't you come to my office after you are off duty? Perhaps we could have dinner?"

"That sounds wonderful, sir," she said. "It's been some time, hasn't it?"

"Far too much time, I feel," Cornelius replied earnestly. She grinned back at him. He cleared his throat. "Ah, let's not keep Mr. Malfoy waiting any longer than necessary."

Sarah instantly went back into 'professional' mode. "Yes sir."

She exited. A few moments later, and the tall figure of Lucius Malfoy, serpent's head cane and all, entered the room. Fudge gave him a look of innocent curiosity. "Ah, Lucius. What can I do for you? I heard that your business was most urgent."

"You could say that, Minister. At least, more "urgent" than your investigation into the death of Thomas Avery seems to have been. It's been months, Minister, months. You have my testimony yet Dressler is still walking around, a free woman, *teaching* schoolchildren? What kind of justice is that, Cornelius?"

The Minister of Magic was taken aback a bit by the rage in his old acquaintance's voice. "Lucius, I assure you, that matter is of great personal importance to me, and I shall not wait a moment longer than is necessary..."

"Define *necessary*, if you would," Lucius spat back. "Give me the truth, Fudge."

Cornelius took in a deep breath. "Mr. Malfoy, please be reasonable. The physical evidence does not point to any suspect. All we have is your word against that of a celebrated war hero. We cannot go to trial with such little evidence, Lucius. We cannot risk it."

"You *are* frightened of her, aren't you?" Lucius said softly. "I suppose you should be. She'd wipe the floor with you in a duel, and she's as brilliant as she is deranged. May I remind you of the deaths of Amycus and Alecto Carrow?"

“Lucius, both were former Death Eaters, killed whilst in the process of carrying out illegal activities, to put it lightly.”

“The brutality with which they were killed, especially Amycus, points to a killer that is fanatically dedicated, a killer that believes he or she is doing what is right, what is just. A killer that has no conscience, because he or she believes that the targets deserve a fate worse than death. Thomas Avery was brutally murdered. He was ambushed, tortured to the point of insanity, and then killed with the *Avada Kedavra*.”

“I know all of that, Lucius,” Fudge said tiredly. “And I suspect that you are right. But I can’t *do* anything unless I can prove it. That is the way the system works.”

“Then the system is *broken*, and we must circumvent it. I will not stand for this, Fudge. Thomas’s record was that of a generous and kindly gentleman, acquitted all of crimes he allegedly committed because he had no choice in his actions. I was also forced to do horrific things under the power of the Imperius Curse. Will Dressler come for me next? She clearly has no concept of *justice* except for the one that’s been twisted and defiled by in her own diseased mind. I demand action, Cornelius.”

Fudge sat up in his chair. “Lucius, I’ve known you for a long time, and I respect you. But you are in no position to demand anything from me.”

Lucius glared at him. “If you refuse to act, you will compromise the negotiations with the Dark Lord. Is Dressler’s life worth *that*?”

“What have you to do with those negotiations?” Fudge demanded.

“I am a servant of the Dark Lord, Cornelius.”

“Yet you maintain your innocence.”

“I have done nothing illegal *since* I joined the Dark Lord’s ranks. I have committed no crimes. I joined him for ideological reasons. But I have grown close to him, Cornelius. You had best appease my demands, or the deal is off. Do *not* test me on this.”

Fudge sighed, and remained silent for a long moment. "Very well," he said at last. "I will do as you ask. I will issue a warrant for Daphne Dressler's arrest for the murder of Avery. I cannot promise anything more."

"She doesn't *deserve* a trial, Cornelius," Lucius hissed.

"Nonetheless, she will get one, because she is entitled to one under the law. I cannot do anything about that."

"I'll make sure she's found guilty, don't worry about that," Lucius replied ominously. "Thank you for your time, Minister."

He turned and left, leaving Fudge sweating bullets in his office chair.

Andromeda Virgo Black Tonks sat alone on the edge of her bed in a dim cell somewhere in the basement of the Ministry of Magic, trying desperately to understand how in Merlin's name she'd ended up in this situation. Andromeda had never been one prone to getting into trouble, even from her childhood days. She was always the quiet one, the well-behaved one: curious but cautious. The three Black sisters had been special, each in their own way. Bellatrix was the most powerful magically; that had never been in doubt. Narcissa had her own strengths. Andromeda's magical potential was probably below average for a pureblood. That was fine with her; she'd never been overly reliant on magic to go about her daily life. But it hadn't sat so well with her family, especially when she had two prodigies in her extended family: Bellatrix and Sirius. Well, it might be a bit of stretch to describe Sirius as a prodigy. Prodigies usually took interest in the great potential they could hypothetically reach. Privately, Andromeda thought that Sirius had wasted most of that potential, and given his stay in Azkaban he might have missed his chance to become one of the leading wizards of his generation. A skilled duelist he was, but still...he could have been so much more.

Andromeda leaned back against the cold, stone wall of her prison. It wasn't really the best time to allow her thoughts to linger on what might have been. Then again, it wasn't as if she really had anything to do instead. She had no illusions about escape; even if it were

possible, she knew that she'd be as alone out there as she was in here. Even Dumbledore could not help her. To do so would be to send a message to Fudge that he was taking sides, and in so doing, he'd bring about the Minister's greatest nightmare; that a man with the following and power of Albus Dumbledore was challenging his rule, and there wasn't a damned thing he could do about it. He'd try, of course. Fudge was nothing if not stubborn. But Andromeda had no desire to see a power struggle waged on her behalf. She was not nearly that important. Amelia had talked to her at length about the consequences of what they were doing; it seemed as though her boss was trying to rationalize her own actions and choices by framing them in the context of Andromeda's situation.

And all things considered, her situation could have been worse. She was a prisoner, yes, but she'd been treated humanly, fed regularly, and the accommodations, though far less comfortable than anything she was used to, were rather good for a woman in her position. Really, her greatest problem was boredom. She knew some sensitive information, yes, but not enough to warrant any extra interrogation, beyond the ten-minute session she'd already been through.

She heard noises, and sat up straighter. Two or three voices in the distance could be heard, though she couldn't make out any of the words. After about a minute, she heard a lock opening, and stood up, ready to meet her visitor. She unconsciously straightened her robes, brushing off some of the accumulated dust. .

"I'm fine right here," she heard a very familiar voice inform one of the guards. "I don't need a guide to find my own mum. Just wait out there."

"My orders-"

"Look, you've got my wand, do you really think I'm going to pull something? Can't you give a fellow Auror a few minutes with her mum?" There was a pause. "That's a good chap."

She heard two pairs of footsteps, one getting fainter, the other growing in volume. She decided to stay where she was, and sure enough, her daughter, wearing off-duty attire, sauntered up to her cell door. She stopped, staring at the bars. "Oh come on, Sanders! You

expect me to talk through these? Get your arse over here and let me in! That's an order!"

Another figure, this one wearing red Auror's robes, hustled up to the cell. He pulled out a key, and then hesitated. "I'm not sure I'm supposed to-"

Her daughter grabbed his arm. "If it'll make you feel better, you can lock me in with her."

The Auror, a young brown-haired man who couldn't have been older than eighteen, nodded and unlocked the cell. "I'll give you ten minutes."

Already halfway into the cell, Nymphadora swung around to face him. "You'll give me as long as I bloody well please, Cadet Sanders!"

"Yes Ma'am!" the boy snapped.

"Go on, then!" Nymphadora said, waving him out. After closing and locking the cell door, the boy hurried out of their sight. Nymphadora sighed, looking around. "Bloody hell mum, they've buried you a few hundred miles underground. I didn't even know this place existed."

"Really, it didn't until about a week ago. After the breakout from Azkaban, the Ministry needed a new holding facility. These tunnels have been down here for quite some time; we're not sure who built them, when, or why. They don't seem to lead anywhere."

"Goblins, most likely," her daughter said, looking around. "We aren't the best at tunneling through solid rock if you know what I mean."

"You're probably right," Andromeda conceded. She'd never really had much respect for the creatures before. She'd been taught that she was better than them; that they were greedy and treacherous beings whose place was in the service of wizards. Harry had imparted some ideas to her daughter that radically challenged that worldview. The very idea that goblins could wield their own magic, which was, of course, what history textbooks stated was the advantage that gave wizards superiority over all other peoples in this world, was almost frightening to her.

Her daughter laughed.

“What?”

Nymphadora smiled. “You know, I never imagined this situation. Here, you’re the one in trouble and I’m the one in a position of authority trying to get you out of the mess you’ve made.”

Andromeda couldn’t hold back an ironic chuckle at that. “If you’d told me a few years ago that this was going to happen, I might have smacked you. I suppose that just shows we can never foresee everything.” She sighed. “You seem to be quite the boss around here.”

“Well, that’s because the cadets get stuck with guard duty. If this were, say, Azkaban, I doubt I could have pulled that off. Bloody kids don’t know any better. They know I’m their superior in rank, and until recently I was on track to earn a commander’s badge. So when I tell them to do something, even dressed like this, they do it. They’re bloody frightened of me.” She laughed again. “I’m suspended, of course, but they don’t know that. That’s why I had to get here as quickly as I could, before the word gets out.”

“Suspended?” Andromeda repeated.

Her daughter nodded. “Did you really expect anything different? I mean, Fudge is paranoid as hell, and I suppose that for once he’s got good reason to be. I’m the one who told Dumbledore and the Order about what really happened. I was there, hiding, when they took you lot away in chains. Fudge was hoping to keep it all secret for a few days, but when he heard that Dumbledore knew what had happened he had to act before everything was in place. The public’s bought it, for now, but he doesn’t have the evidence to make that sale stick, because he didn’t have time to manufacture it. Drake’s refusing to help him further.”

“I suppose I should have suspected him from the start. Jericho’s a good man, but he’s bound by tradition, more than most. His family had never betrayed a Light government. And Jericho, while brave in combat, didn’t really seem the type to break that mold in peacetime.”

“Yeah, well, it happens. Why’d he do it?”

“He was scared of us. He was frightened by the plans we were making. We were talking about a coup, a genuine coup d’état against Fudge. He wasn’t willing to follow where we were leading him. And so he did what he could to distance himself and stop us in our tracks. Has Rufus been arrested?”

“Surprisingly, no,” Nymphadora replied. “I mean, I’m more than a little shocked.”

“I’m not sure I am,” Andromeda said. “Jericho did what he wanted; he distanced himself from our efforts and he stopped the plan from going through. But he’s got no personal loyalty to Fudge beyond loyalty to the position of government he holds. By betraying the other plotters, he’d just be helping Fudge, not making things any better.”

“And that whole mess makes sense to you?” Nymphadora asked.

“I’m not saying I would have done the same thing,” Andromeda clarified. “But what he did, even if it was the wrong thing to do, and a cowardly thing to do, was rational, and to an extent, understandable, given his situation.”

“Mum, it’s not right.”

“His betrayal? Or the fact that we live in a world where I can rationalize it, even understand it?”

“Both, I guess,” Nymphadora said, sighing. “Do you have any idea how long you’ll be in here, Mum?”

“I hoped that you might know the answer to that question,” was Andromeda’s reply. “I’ve heard absolutely nothing since I was arrested yesterday.”

“I don’t think Fudge knows what to do with the lot of you,” her daughter said. “He can’t keep someone like Amelia locked up for very long. He doesn’t have the evidence to make holding her or any of you for an extended period of time acceptable in the public mind. His

decisions and judgment are always under question, in no small part thanks to Harry's interviews."

"Yes, I guess he will have to answer to the people in short order. The very idea of someone like Amelia Bones plotting a takeover of the Ministry has to seem absurd to some people."

"The list of precisely *who* will be getting steadily larger as time goes on. People haven't had a chance to digest all of this yet. When they do, Fudge had better be ready for it."

"Still, I'm likely in for a pretty long stay," Andromeda said, sighing.

"Yeah, I'd reckon so."

"Will you be suspended for that whole time?"

"Worried about me, Mum? Nah, Rufus already knows about this. He won't stand for it. I'll be back on active duty in no time at all. My removal from Fudge's personal security detail will most likely be permanent. Not that I care much. Those brownnosers McGlinchy and Dawlish can have the bugger."

Andromeda smiled. "That's my girl," she said proudly. "I only wish your father could have been here to see you."

"Aw, we're better off without him," Nymphadora said, waving dismissively.

"Maybe," Andromeda said. "I do still miss him. Ted...well, he wasn't perfect, but he was a good man at heart."

Nymphadora frowned. "You can really still say that after he ran off with that skirt, whatshername?"

"Julia," Andromeda supplied. "I can't say that it didn't hurt, when he cheated on me, but that wasn't why I left him."

"Really?"

"I guess I never really talked about this with you," Andromeda said. "Nymmy, I didn't leave him because he cheated on me. I loved Ted. I kept his last name, after all of that."

"Mum, I can't see you calling yourself 'Black' under any circumstances."

"True," she acknowledged. "But Nymmy, the reason I left him is because of *you*. I could have lived with it if he'd just been unfaithful to me. But his infidelity didn't stop there, and that was something I *couldn't* live with. He ignored you, his own daughter. I think he might have been scared of you; getting used to the fact that he'd married a witch was difficult enough. But you were as much his daughter as you were mine, and he never had any time for you."

Nymphadora froze. "You really did all of that for me?"

"Well, not completely, but you tipped the balance. It probably would have happened sooner or later; I would have lost patience with him, or he might have just gotten up and left. I did get to end it on my own terms, which is worth something."

"You heard from him since?"

Andromeda shook her head. "No. He's just disappeared back into the Muggle world. I can't say I'm disappointed. I've moved on, and I'm sure he has too."

"Ever get his mail? What with having his last name and all?"

"Sometimes," Andromeda smiled. She shook her head. "It was a long time ago, Nymmy. He left when you were still an infant."

"I don't remember him, really. Just a few random images that may or may not be real," her daughter admitted.

Andromeda gently grasped her daughter by the shoulders. "Nymmy, you have no idea how proud I am of you. You are the most important thing in my life."

Her daughter groaned. "Aw, Mum, did you really have to go there? Way to put pressure on a girl!"

Andromeda smiled in amusement. "Nymphadora, no matter what you do with your life, I will always be proud of you. I don't want you to ever doubt that."

"Thanks, Mum," her daughter replied, beaming. She checked her watch. "Well, I better be going, otherwise I might end up joining you in this cell. I'm technically breaking the law right now."

"Go on," Andromeda urged her. "I'll be fine. Trust me, seeing you has made this experience a bit more bearable."

The Tonks women embraced, and Andromeda planted a kiss on her daughter's forehead. "Good luck, Nymmy."

"You too, Mum."

They separated, and Nymphadora turned to leave, before realizing that her path was blocked by the iron bars of her mother's cell. "Bloody hell," she cursed. "SANDERS! GET YOUR ARSE OVER HERE AND LET ME OUT!"

Harry sat on the shore of the lake, reflecting on the day's events. He should have seen it coming. He should have known that Fudge's arrogance and paranoia would mean a carefully orchestrated plot involving extended planning and a myriad of different sectors of the Ministry was doomed from the start, but at the time he'd been too exhilarated by the prospects of Fudge being replaced by someone competent that the possibility things could fall apart in such a spectacular fashion hadn't even occurred to him. Once more, overconfidence had proven to be his weakness. The painful reality, Harry was learning, was that he never knew as much as he thought he did, and that there was always someone with more experience, more skill, more influence. For all of his pessimism, Snape's warnings about the dangers of destabilizing the Ministry and assuming that the masses would follow once action was taken were proving to more accurate than he'd anticipated.

It was an odd place for Harry to be, given that the reason he was out here was that he felt the need to escape from the shockwaves still reverberating through Hogwarts as its students and staff learned more about the shocking events of the past day. Susan's accusations, though driven more by anger than rational perception, had played their own role in Harry's decision to forsake his classes in favor of blissful solitude.

"Blissful indeed," Harry whispered quietly to himself. Not ten meters from where he was standing was where he'd first dragged Ginny ashore, exhausted by the Herculean effort that he'd needed just to survive the attempt on his life. Her blood had continued to flow, hardly stemmed by his inexperienced attempt at bandaging the wound with strips of her robes. She'd lain there, motionless, and Harry had leaned over her, hopeless, afraid, and angry. Ironically, his own emotions had been echoed all the stronger seconds later when Fleur Delacour had noticed Gabrielle's body. Ginny had been hurt badly, but she'd lived despite it all. His ordeal, as bad as it had been, could have been far worse.

He sighed as he tried to push the memories of that dreadful day back into the darkest recesses of his mind. It hardly made it any easier that Harry probably owed his life on that day to Cedric Diggory, killed months later for being at the wrong place at the wrong time, for being stubborn enough to refuse to surrender the Triwizard Tournament to his Slytherin rival. But Cedric's passion to win glory for his House, his stubborn nobility, his competitive spirit, and his desire for fairness in all things were an essential part of his character. Had Cedric given up, had he not fought Harry with every fiber of his being, for that one moment in time, he would not have been Cedric Diggory.

The memories of his fourth year at Hogwarts would haunt him for the rest of his life. If the ordeal he'd suffered in the Chamber of Secrets at the hands of his own guardian had been an awakening, the trials and tribulations of the previous year had been his initiation into the brutal, uncaring ritual of war.

He felt the presence even before he heard the voice, but he was still surprised when he recognized the speaker. "Been a tough day, hasn't it?"

Harry began to nod, but then realized that the gesture couldn't be seen. "I suppose it has," he sighed. "The first of many, I fear."

"Probably, if what I hear around is right."

Peter Lowry, looking considerably less disheveled and unkempt than the last time they'd met, plopped down next to the Boy-Who-Lived. The jumper he wore seemed in better shape than most of his other clothing, leading Harry to wonder if it might have been a gift from another student. "You know," Harry said, "they don't often take kindly to First Years skipping out on their classes."

"I guess you didn't hear the news. Classes are cancelled for the day. Teachers are all in a big, important meeting, I reckon."

"Right," Harry said, mentally kicking himself. Of course the first thing Dumbledore would do would be to convene his staff, probably bring some of the Order members in on it, too. Hell, he might have taken McGonagall and some of the others straight to Black Manor already.

"Is it true what they say? Somebody tried to overthrow the Ministry?"

Harry was mildly disappointed that the boy would even ask the question in such a manner. "Not exactly. Fudge arrested some people on charges of conspiracy, but nothing's been proven."

Peter chuckled slightly, which drew a look from Harry. "Boy, if I didn't know any better, I'd say you were disappointed. It's not as if you weren't right in the thick of things, as it were. I'm no fool, Potter."

The combination of his youthful cheerfulness and his East London accent made him sound like the arrogant son of some Muggle mob boss. It was refreshing, in its own way. "Alright, you got me," Harry said, raising his hands in mock surrender. "How much chocolate from Honeydukes will earn your silence?"

Peter grinned. "Looky here...the great 'Arry Potter reduced to bribing a bloody eleven year old. What's the world come to, eh?"

Harry smiled despite himself. Peter was really unlike anyone he'd ever known. Maybe that was why he liked him so much.

"So what's so 'great' about me?" he asked.

"I ain't got no bloody clue. Ya must've been a hell of a baby, if you did what they say."

Harry couldn't hold back a smile at that assessment. "I suppose I was. Mum did all the work, though."

"Yeah, I've also heard that," Peter admitted.

"Do you make a habit of pretending not to know things?" Harry asked.

"Sometimes," Peter replied. His voice grew serious. "Pot...Harry, we need to talk."

"Yes. Yes, I'd say we do," Harry replied, turning to face the First Year. "Do you understand how incredible your ability really is? Wandless magic is a rare gift, an increasingly rare one, actually. Even in centuries past, it took years of training before anyone could do anything like what you are capable of doing."

"Well, I didn't have any reason to know that," Peter insisted defensively. "I'm just a bloody Mudblood."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "That's a pejorative, you know?"

"A perjora-whatsit?"

"An insult, if you will. Certainly not something I've ever heard a Muggleborn use to describe themselves."

"Hey, I don't really give a rat's arse what people think of my family. Truth is, they could use the worst words they've got, and they still wouldn't be close."

"That bad, huh?"

"You bet," Peter said. A growing look of discomfort spread over his face. It might be occurring to him that he shouldn't be so open like this to a person that was, really, a total stranger.

"It's alright," Harry said. "You can trust me. If my guardians are to be believed, my aunt and uncle are pretty abhorrent people too."

"Abhorrent? I like that word."

"So, what's your story, anyway?"

Peter hesitated. "I'm Muggleborn."

"Really? Hadn't noticed."

Peter gave him a sour look. "I grew up in London. Not in the nicest of places, you see. It was just my mum and me for most of the time. Dunno what happened to my dad. Mum never said anything, and I didn't ask."

"I see."

"I got some schooling, but not as much as I was supposed to. Mum was sick a lot; I had to watch over her while she got better. When I got older I had to help keep things together. Mum would sometimes even forget to go to church."

"Church?" Harry asked.

"Mum was a real religious sort. We walked about an hour each Sunday to the Catholic Church closest to us. Had to get into our 'Sunday best,' at least to the extent we could dress all nice."

"Are you religious?" Harry asked. It became quickly evident that he'd made a mistake.

"Bloody hell no, what do you take me for, anyway? Mum has her God, and her Christ, and it's never done us even a little good. She reads the Bible all the time; I've seen her copy lying around the house. She highlights and underlines particular passages...mostly the bits about the Devil."

"The Devil?" Harry asked. His knowledge of Muggle faiths wasn't particularly strong. "Sort of her God's opposite, his rival?"

"Kinda like that," Peter replied. "I dunno, I never paid much attention in Church anyway. Well, not really..." He looked away, and then down at his feet. "Lots of talk about witches and possession and the like."

Harry hesitated for a moment. "Peter, how did your mum react when she found out you could do magic?"

Peter turned on him, eyes blazing. "How do you *think* she bloody well reacted? She was scared to death, angry, thought I was possessed by Satan himself!"

Harry frowned. Something was wrong here. "Peter, did she hurt you?"

"That's none of your business," Peter snapped.

There was a long silence. "I'm sorry, Peter," Harry said softly.

"I told you: it's none of your business," Peter insisted.

"Peter, what were those Slytherins talking about with regards to your family?" Harry asked gently. He had a feeling he was on to something.

"What is this, an interrogation?" Peter demanded angrily. "I don't have to tell you nothing."

"No, you don't," Harry agreed. "This is purely voluntary. But I want to help you, Peter. I was once in your position, at the bottom of the Slytherin hierarchy, hated and bullied for reasons beyond my control. I don't want to ever see anyone go through that again. But I can't help you unless you tell me what happened," he finished.

Peter wore an expression of utter vulnerability. "I'm an abomination," he said quietly. "At least if you ask any of my ancestors."

Harry frowned. "What do you mean?"

"You heard what the other said? About my family?"

Harry tried to recall the incident. He remembered some references to the deaths of wizards, various methods of execution, but the context

was unclear. "I...not really," he admitted. "I was angrier with them for bullying you. The reasons for it weren't that important."

Peter looked away, over the lake. "Back in the day, you know, they used to kill people because they were witches. Most thought it was just superstition, but a lot of people got killed even so."

"I'm aware of that," Harry said.

"I'll bet you don't know that some of my relatives were right in the center of the whole thing."

"Your ancestors were magistrates?"

"Magistrates, priests...what they all had in common was the Faith. And they all thought that witchcraft was a thing of the Devil."

"They weren't alone," Harry said, trying to process everything he was hearing.

"No, they weren't. But that Justin Lowry made a lot of enemies. I'm not even sure how he's related to me; how many generations have passed, you know?"

"Most of us have family that we aren't proud of," Harry said, thinking of Sirius, before Lily's sister and her family popped up in his mind.

"Funny thing is that for a while, I was proud of 'em. That's what Mum said. I think that was all she had left, her God, her religion, her family history. God knows she had nothing else. Well, nothing else worth a damn. Just some little demon child."

"She saw you perform magic."

Peter nodded. "I didn't even do anything. A can of paint fell off a shelf and might have split my skull if I hadn't stopped it. I just thought about wanting it to stop and it started floating in the air, right in front of Mum. Another time, when she grabbed me a bit too hard, she got shocked. I got a whale of beating for that. I was nothing. I don't know why she even kept me around. I was just a useless little freak."

"You're magical, Peter. That doesn't make you a freak."

"Oh, cut it out," Peter retorted angrily. "You've seen what I can do! You seen anyone else do that recently? Nobody ever taught me anything. I'm still a freak, and it ain't worth your while to try to make me feel better about it."

"Peter, you are gifted," Harry assured him. "What you can do...it's almost unheard of for a Muggleborn. You've got amazing potential."

"I can't control it," Peter said quietly. "What I did with those pots...that's the first time I managed it. And what use is being able to juggle a bunch of pots, anyway."

"It's a start," Harry told him.

The two faced each other for a few seconds, Peter's eyes darting here and there. Harry's fingers dug into his robe, and touched an unfamiliar object. He pulled it out. It was the odd artifact that Luna had given him earlier in the year. Peter's gaze instantly shifted to it.

"What's that?" he asked, sounding a bit frightened.

"I've honestly got no idea," Harry said, flipping it over. "A friend of mine gave it to me. I don't know why."

Peter looked closer. "Can I see it?"

"Sure." He handed the artifact to the boy.

"Can't you hear that?" he asked.

Harry strained, but he heard nothing but a light breeze, some distant chatter, and water gently lapping over the rocky shore of the lake.

"That humming..." Peter said quietly. "It's beautiful. You really can't hear it?"

"No," Harry said. "Do you feel any different?"

"I'm not sure. Can I keep it? See what happens?"

“Go ahead,” Harry said, smiling. He checked his watch. “I really ought to get going. Ginny and Hermione will wonder where I got off to.”

Harry rose and turned to leave. He’d taken three steps when he heard, “Thanks, Harry.”

He turned around. “For what?”

Peter shrugged.

“So, I’ve finished marking your essays, and overall, I’m pleased,” Daphne Dressler, Professor, Defense Against the Dark Arts, informed her class of 5th years, a class that included her ward. “There are, however, some areas of concern that I would like to address before we go any further.”

There were a few scattered groans, even distributed between the Gryffindors and Slytherins. Daphne’s teaching style, while a bit less intense and considerably less intimidating than it had began, was still highly demanding. The consequence, though, was that her students were actually learning useful skills and strategies for the first time since Lupin had been around. Harry still felt they were woefully unprepared for any kind of attack, but it was better than what they’d had before.

Indeed, her classroom exercises had been effective enough that Harry had placed his idea of an extra-curricular dueling club on the side for the time being. Besides his time was very limited, as Snape was doing his very best to make Harry give up on a long-term future in Potions by assigning concoctions that stretched Harry’s concentration, intuition, and memory to the breaking point. Snape wasn’t doing it to belittle him, or humiliate him, but at this point, Harry’s initial and surprising aptitude for the subject was beginning to peter out and Snape had recommended he drop the advanced study course, leaving Elisha to continue on alone. Harry wasn’t willing to give up so easily and privately believed Snape would be quite disappointed if he did. Still, the additional study time was leading to a lot of late nights, and more than a few all-nighters, as Harry still had other work that needed his attention.

"We're coming up on the holiday break in a few weeks. I'm pleased with the progress that you've all made. When we began, most of you were well below what I'd consider acceptable in terms of basic spell casting, magical repertoire, and knowledge of personal defense strategies. Now, I think each of you might actually have a chance to fend off an attacker long enough to summon the authorities. You should be proud of how far you've come. I haven't made this easy for you; at times, I've sought to present you with challenges I did not expect you to be able to overcome. Some of you have surpassed my expectations, but all of you have given a good effort, and as your teacher, I appreciate that."

Daphne paused, gathering herself. "I wanted to give you an opportunity to ask questions. They can concern the material, my teaching methods, the exercises we've done in class, or anything else if you so wish." A few hands were raised. "Miss Brown?"

Lavender, who had, despite appearing terribly incompetent earlier in the year, proven herself to be, if nothing else, a hard worker, seemed anxious about her question. "Professor...what exactly are we going to be learning during the second half of the year? We've covered most of the spells that you talked about at the beginning of the term, except for, well..."

"The more dangerous ones," Daphne finished. "Some of the Dark ones. I do understand your concern, Miss Brown, and I must admit that the syllabus for the second half of the year is still a work in progress. This is my first time teaching schoolchildren, and I have learned some difficult lessons along the way. I will do my best to avoid making any of you feel uncomfortable with the material. I also want to go back over much of the material, and refine your new skills. Any other questions? Miss Granger?" Harry sat up straighter, glancing over at his friend.

"Professor," Hermione said, "you had discussed the possibility of a midterm examination before the Holliday Break..."

"Right," Daphne said. "I'm still working on the details, but I think today is a good day to inform you that during the last week of classes, there will be an examination, most likely involving an essay as well as a

practical demonstration of some of the skills you've acquired. I will try to give you more detail by the end of the week."

Hermione nodded, scribbling notes.

Daphne began to turn to the board, and then stopped dead in her tracks. Harry frowned. He couldn't sense anything unusual. The cause of Daphne's unease became clear when the door to the classroom was shoved open with unnecessary force, smacking loudly into the castle wall. Two red-robed figures hurried into the room, taking up positions on either side. Following them was the graceful, menacing figure of Lucius Malfoy, and finally, Cornelius Fudge. Harry felt a chill go down his spine.

"What is the meaning of this?" Daphne demanded. Her right arm was cocked, and after sending a glare at Lucius Malfoy her eyes darted to the window before she locked them with Fudge's.

"I think you know the answer, Madam Dressler," Fudge replied. "You are hereby placed under arrest for the premeditated murder of Thomas Avery, and two counts of unauthorized usage of an Unforgivable Curse. You will come with us."

Harry's mind was spinning. His first instinct was to deny that it was even possible. He forced himself to focus. The reality was that it *could* be true, but that it hardly mattered at the moment. He waited for Daphne's mental instructions.

I need a diversion, Harry. They aren't even watching you. Take out the Aurors, and I'll handle the rest. I know it's a lot to ask of you...

I'll do it, Harry thought back, his mental voice hard and determined.

He readied himself, taking notice of the positions of the two Aurors...and struck.

Launching himself sideways out of his chair, he used the first two spells that came to mind, and the result was a Slicing Curse that ripped through Dawlish's shoulder, sending a spray of blood toward the students sitting close to his right and a powerful Striking Curse that smacked McGlinchy right in the jaw, knocking her off her feet.

Daphne was in motion at the instant the first syllable was forming in Harry's mouth, deftly covering the distance between the front of the classroom and the nearest window, which swung open with a whispered password. Daphne leapt through the opening, seemingly about to plummet dozens of meters to her death. A wild hex, probably from Fudge, hit the wall to the right of the window, dissipating harmlessly against the stone. They heard a grunt of exertion, and Daphne reappeared, straddling a racing broom. She shot off into the distance, completing her dramatic escape.

Harry swung back around, wand drawn, ready to face Fudge. It didn't matter that he was the Minister of Magic, at that moment, he was just another threat, one he was determined to neutralize.

Time seemed to slow as the action unfolded before Lucius Abraxas Malfoy. In the space of less than ten seconds, a satisfying arrest had turned into a botched debacle. Dressler was gone, two Aurors were down at the hands of the Grey Maiden's ward, and the enraged young man was now drawing a bead on the Minister himself, whose hand was limply reaching into his robes, as if he stood any chance against the Boy Who Lived in a duel. Most of the students were frozen in their seats, including his own son. Even Daphne Greengrass and Theodore Nott looked taken aback. Greengrass had been splattered by some of Dawlish's blood, but didn't seem to have taken notice.

As Potter turned toward the Minister, wand arm raised, Lucius Malfoy found himself unexpectedly facing the opportunity of a lifetime. Incredibly, Potter was presenting his back to the "ex"-Death Eater, as if he'd never even noticed he was there. Lucius was ready to strike. What he needed to decide in the split second before his window of opportunity closed, or Potter managed to inflict grievous harm on the Minister, was the nature of his blow. A Killing Curse, at this instant, would be a foolproof way of ridding his Master of his greatest foe. Lucius had performed that Unforgivable more times than he could remember. It would be as effortless as swatting a fly. He would not soon get this chance again.

And yet...

The rewards for killing Potter would undoubtedly be great. At the least, he would secure his position as the Dark Lord's foremost servant, supplanting Bellatrix with his bold and dramatic action. The Dark Lord did not have access to a great deal of material wealth at the moment, but that was certain to change. The reward could be greater than everything he'd ever imagined...

But by casting a Killing Curse, here, in a room of Hogwarts students, many with powerful and influential family, not to mention in front of the *Minister*, and, however incapacitated, two Aurors, would be the end of his comfortable ride as the Minister's puppet-master. Indeed, Fudge would have no choice but to declare Lucius an outlaw; even their relationship could not prevent that from happening. The murder of the Boy-Who-Lived by a supposedly reformed Death Eater could not go unpunished. He would lose his fortune, perhaps even his family, at least for the time being, his freedom, and if the Dark Lord failed to act faster than Dressler, his life and the lives of his family would be forfeit. The Malfoy line would *die*.

These thoughts rushed through his mind, at as Potter completed his pivot, a question formed in his mind.

Was *that* worth Potter's life?

Out of time, Lucius stabbed with his wand, uttering an incantation, and watched a brilliant beam of scarlet energy lance out, catching Potter right between the shoulder blades. He collapsed to the ground, revealing the terrified figure of Cornelius Fudge, wand not fully drawn.

Lucius exhaled a breath he hadn't known he'd been holding, and wearily advanced towards his fallen target. In the blink of an eye, that Mudblood Granger had gone from sitting like a statue in at her desk to crouched protectively over her friend, wand drawn. Normally, it wouldn't have done much to deter Lucius; she was just a Mudblood, after all, no matter how book smart. But there was something about her at that moment that screamed danger, and Lucius froze. He begin to make his way over to the Minister, keeping a watchful eye on the two teenagers.

"Seize him!" Fudge cried. Dawlish, bleeding badly from a wound that cut across right arm and shoulder to his chest, along with the apparently-not-so-unconscious McGlinchy, stumbled forward, attempting to comply with their boss's order. Granger threw Lucius another look, and the mystified Death Eater, still completely baffled as to why he was backing down at all, moved farther towards the back of the classroom.

"Back off," the Mudblood said, her voice heavy with emotion. "I mean it. Don't come a step closer."

McGlinchy, despite her a swollen jaw and minor nosebleed, laughed at that. "Are you really threatening *me*, girl? Move aside before you get hurt."

"I'm warning you," Hermione said. "I don't want to do this, but I will if I have no other choice." She looked at the students sitting near to her. "Get out of the way. *Now!*" Those addressed, mostly Gryffindors, quickly obeyed.

"Miss Granger, you will allow my Aurors to arrest Potter or I'll have your wand snapped," Fudge growled.

"You won't get the chance. Back off," she told McGlinchy, who'd stepped closer.

"Try me, girl," she hissed.

Hermione closed her eyes, holding out her left hand, palm facing them. Lucius felt the surge of power before it was even manifested, abruptly realizing the source of his unease as a massive fireball erupted from the pale skin of the younger witch's left palm, blasting McGlinchy and Dawlish off their feet and incinerating just about everything in the space between them, including a pair of desks just to each side. The two Aurors hit the ground, severely burned, their robes aflame. Granger stood there defiantly, ready to unleash another inferno if the situation called for it.

Fudge's eyes were practically bulging out of their sockets in comical fashion, he was so enraged by the turn of events. "You'll pay for that,

girl. You just assaulted two officers of the law. This is your last day in *our* world."

"I do not believe that you have the authority to make such a judgment, Cornelius," the voice of Dumbledore boomed from behind them. "I will ask you kindly to leave the grounds at once. The woman you came to arrest has fled. These two are students at this institution, and as such, fall under *my* authority."

"Do not dare to order me around, Dumbledore," Fudge snarled. "These two are criminals and they shall be dealt with accordingly."

Dumbledore turned a harsh gaze to Lucius. "You have really fallen so far, Cornelius, that you keep *filth* such as this at your side?"

Cornelius drew himself up to his full height, which was considerably less than that of his adversary. "I am the *Minister of Magic*. I will *not* stand for this, this *outrage!* Two of my Aurors have been cut down by *illicit* magic, performed by the two in front of me. By my authority-"

"You have no authority *here*, Cornelius," Dumbledore said in a low, almost menacing tone. "And what respect I may have once held for you has long since vanished. Get out. Now."

"Potter used a Dark Curse, right in front of me," Cornelius protested. "He used an illegal curse on an officer of the law in front of the Minister of Magic himself. And you expect me to *let him go* because you are asking politely?"

Lucius felt power permeate the room. Dumbledore's fury had been aroused, and Fudge seemed comically oblivious of the terrific danger he was now in. "I am *not* asking, Cornelius. I am ordering you, as Headmaster of this school and thus holder of sole authority on its grounds, that you and your cadre leave my school at once. If you do not comply, I will be forced to remove you."

"Are you *threatening* me, Dumbledore?" Fudge demanded. "For the last time, I am the *Minister of-*"

"It doesn't matter if you are Merlin his-bloody-self," Hermione cut in. "By Decree of the Wizengamot, in 1504, the Headmaster of Hogwarts

has ultimate authority over his students and staff, even in a case involving the upper levels of the Ministry.”

Dumbledore smiled slightly. “Miss Granger has always had an excellent memory. And in this case, she is absolutely correct. Get out of my school.”

Fudge was turning red with rage. Dawlish, who had somehow gotten to his feet despite the gash across his right side and the horrible burns over much of his exposed skin, started tugging on the Minister’s arm.

Dumbledore spoke again, but this time, power crackled through his very words. “*Hear me, Hogwarts! Banish these villains from the Hallowed Halls of My Forefathers!*”

Lucius felt his very presence start to slip away, as if some powerful force was dragging him, mind and body, from the room. An instant later the world went black.

A/N: KickAss!Dumbledore is always fun to write. Especially when one as detestable as Fudge is on the receiving end.

So, that was fun. I'm going to try to write minimum-length author's notes, in the hopes that my readers understand how this series is going to work.

One thing: Andromeda's marital status was developed before DH. In OotP, Andromeda's name was blasted off the family tapestry for her marriage to a "Muggle." That Ted Tonks was a Muggleborn wasn't established until Book 7. So that's my reasoning. Besides, I think the Tonks women work well together. No need for a male intrusion.

I do hope Peter's speech was believable, given his background. I mean, my knowledge of the vocabulary of London street rats is...limited. It sounded convincing to me, but that doesn't mean much.

Chapter 11: Matters of the Heart

Hermione hurried to keep up with Madam Pomfrey, and, more importantly, the stretcher she was levitating ahead of her, the stretcher on which her best friend lay unconscious. Her mind was still trying to process the ramifications of what has just transpired. In the space of minutes, Daphne had evaded arrest, Harry had aided her escape by assaulting a pair of Aurors before being knocked unconscious when he turned his back to Lucius Malfoy (how close he might have been to death was not the least of the thoughts swirling through her mind), and she had unleashed the power within her to protect her friend, attacking the same pair of Aurors in front of none other than the Minister. To top it all off, she'd witnessed a jaw-dropping display of the power of the wards of Hogwarts, wards that, it seemed, were as capable of driving men out as they were adept at keeping men in. And that was just the beginning...

The doors to the Hospital Wing swung open of their own accord, and surprisingly someone was already waiting for them. Ginny looked terribly anxious. Blaise hadn't been in class, and he wasn't here either. Not that the whereabouts of that particular young man was of any real importance, of course. Not right now. She wished Neville had followed. She liked the boy, and regretted the fact that he hadn't spent as much time with the trio as he had in the past.

"Is he...?" Ginny asked quietly.

"I'm almost certain he's just stunned, but the Headmaster wanted him taken here just in case. The spell was cast by Lucius Malfoy, so caution is warranted. What I can guarantee is that I won't be able to help him unless you all stand back and let me do my job," Madam Pomfrey finished. The two of them complied, waiting anxiously for news.

"How did you get here so fast?" Hermione whispered to Ginny.

"I heard Snape telling Flitwick that something had happened in Daphne's class, and, well...I figured that it was a safe bet that I'd find him here," Ginny explained.

“Good thinking,” she remarked, though the darkness of that logic wasn’t lost on her.

Ginny moved closer, as the Matron cast a spell over their unconscious friend, momentarily surrounding his body with a bright blue glow. “Did she say that Lucius Malfoy is the one that hit him?” The redhead sounded almost horrified by the thought.

“A lot of things were happening at the same time,” Hermione began. “But I don’t...”

“He’ll be fine,” Madam Pomfrey announced.

“Why didn’t you just revive him?” Ginny asked, sounding a little cross.

“Miss Weasley, I know who and what Lucius Malfoy really is. I’ve also come across spells that mimic a Stunning Spell and are in fact far more dangerous than that. I’m sure you agree that caution was necessary.”

Ginny nodded. “Sorry.”

Madam Pomfrey shrugged, and then looked toward the entrance to the Hospital Wing. Dumbledore had finally arrived, followed by Snape, McGonagall, and, looking like he’d sprinted all the way from Hogsmeade, Blaise Zabini, who deftly maneuvered around the three adults to join the two girls. “How..?”

“He’s fine,” Hermione whispered quickly. Blaise looked relieved.

“If you’d like to examine him yourself, Albus. I’m aware of the circumstances surrounding this incident, and I’m not prepared to make any assumptions.”

Dumbledore nodded. “Severus, if you would?” Snape, whose knowledge of Dark curses far surpassed that of any of the others in the room, moved toward Harry’s bedside, wand drawn. “Miss Granger, could you describe the spell that you saw Mr. Malfoy cast on Harry?”

“It looked like a Stunning Spell. There wasn’t an incantation, or course, or I didn’t hear it.”

"You will soon learn, Miss Granger, not to always trust your eyes...although in this case, I cannot say that anything seems amiss," Snape replied icily.

All eyes turned to Dumbledore. "Very well. Proceed," he told Snape.

Snape took a deep breath and let it out, even as Hermione held hers in. "*Ennervate*."

Harry's eyes snapped open and he coughed the stale air of his lungs. "Daphne..." he gasped, before his eyes took in his surroundings.

"She got away," Hermione told him instantly. Harry looked to Dumbledore for confirmation.

"She has left the grounds, of that much I am sure," Dumbledore said. His voice sounded tired, lifeless.

Harry tried to sit up, and Madam Pomfrey shoved him back down just as quickly. "I need to-"

Madam Pomfrey cut him off. "Rest,"

"I'm fine," he protested. "I was just stunned."

"Mr. Potter, I hope I do not need to remind you how remarkably fortunate you are on that count," Snape said coldly. "You turned your back to a Death Eater. Had he wished to harm you, you would be dead."

"I know," Harry said quietly. "I don't know why I did that."

"I *do*," Snape said firmly. "You were so consumed with your guardian's safety that you utterly neglected your own. That cannot happen again."

Hermione glanced over at Ginny, who, despite the fact that her boyfriend was awake and coherent, looked even paler than she had minutes before. Harry noticed. "Ginny, I'm alright, really."

"That's not..." she began. She shook her head. "You're right. You're still here, and that's what matters."

"I'm fine, Gin. I'm still here."

"*Potter!*" Snape barked. "Do you have the slightest inkling of how *idiotic* your actions were? Do you comprehend what your moment of thoughtlessness might have cost us all? Do you have *any* idea?!" he demanded.

"Severus," Albus said gently. Snape ignored him.

"Potter, use that *brilliant* mind of yours! Do you have any-"

"*I know!*" Harry practically screamed, then sighed. "I know."

Snape's gaze didn't leave him. "Do you? Do you really? Your actions are inexcusable, Potter. You cannot afford to be sentimental. And none of us can afford to allow you to think with your heart before your brain. Do you realize what you just left to the whims of fate?"

"Yes," Harry said, sounding defeated.

Snape didn't reply. He turned around and walked out of the Hospital Wing.

Harry looked devastated. "It's okay," Ginny said softly, as she found their roles reversed.

Harry didn't respond. He just continued to stare at the Entrance to the Hospital Wing, his expression downcast. Hermione thought that while Snape had been too rough on Harry, what he'd been saying was completely accurate. It seemed that Harry had grasped that fact as well.

"Mr. Potter," Dumbledore said. That snapped Harry out of it, and he turned his head to look at the Headmaster. "I'm afraid that I must go. Things have been set in motion, and I must make the appropriate preparations. Are you alright, Harry? Is there anything I can do for you?"

Harry stared into his eyes, looking helpless. "No...I...I don't believe so, Professor."

Dumbledore sighed, and seemed to age before their eyes. "Very well." He slowly turned, with a nod to McGonagall. "Please, stay Minerva. Keep an eye on things here. I will call for you."

The venerable woman nodded, and Dumbledore slipped out of the wing.

Harry moved to get up again, but a quick glance from Madam Pomfrey froze him in his tracks. He reluctantly lay back, staring at the ceiling. Ginny moved closer to his bedside. "Harry, it's going to be okay. Daphne's...safe," she said. Hermione almost frowned at the...disappointment in her tone. *What's going on here?*

Harry, his mind undoubtedly replaying the events of the past half-hour, didn't seem to notice the way his girlfriend had talked about his guardian's status as a free woman. "There's that, at least," he said softly. "How did everything just go to hell in a hand basket, just like that?" he wondered aloud.

"We rarely see the storm coming before it is upon us, Mr. Potter," McGonagall said from across the room. "Even if we suspect the worst, we are always surprised by the occurrence and unprepared for the consequences."

Harry nodded at her wisdom.

"They'll be hunting her, now," Blaise said.

"They won't catch her," Harry said confidently.

"I don't think it likely," McGonagall said. It seemed as if she was holding something back. Then it hit Hermione. Just about everyone that had reassured Harry that Daphne was unharmed had implied that she was innocent, that Fudge and his men were in the wrong...but not a single one had actually stated it. This struck Hermione as terribly suspicious. She began to consider Daphne's past behavior, and it became evident that she probably wasn't above committing the type of crime that she was being accused of.

Harry must know that, she thought. He knows her better than any of us.

But a moment later, Hermione realized she didn't know if that was true. She tried to imagine a situation with her own parents. What if they were accused of the cold-blooded murder of someone, even someone that might have had it coming? Would her first reaction be to consider that it might be true? Of course not; she'd deny it, she'd ignore the evidence, she'd focus on her belief that her parents were good people, and weren't capable of something like that.

She wanted to say something. She wanted to tell Harry the truth.

Bloody hell, you stupid girl! First, you don't even know it's the truth! Second, did you hear Ginny a second ago? Assuming she knows something, she's clearly too terrified to tell him the truth. If she can't do it, how in Merlin's name could you expect it to turn out well?

Hermione bit her tongue. Harry would have to learn the truth...if it even was the truth. *That settles it. I'm not going to risk our friendship on something that I might be entirely wrong about. It's not my place. It's not worth it.*

Hermione could tell herself that all she wanted. Whether she really believed it...well, that was still as uncertain as Daphne's guilt in her own mind.

Severus Snape had made the trek up these stairs to Professor Dumbledore's office many times, and for a host of different reasons. This particular occasion didn't neatly fit into any of the categories he'd established. The oak doors to the Headmaster's office were open, as he expected. The room seemed empty, which was something he hadn't expected. He heard a noise, and looked up to see Dumbledore descending the steps from the observatory study to the rest of his office. "Ah, Severus. Thank you for coming at so late an hour." The man was dressed in his pajamas, something that struck Snape as inappropriate, given the circumstances.

“Given the importance of the events that transpired here today, I can only say I was surprised that your call did not come sooner.”

Dumbledore smiled. “Yes. Though when one physically expels the Minister of Magic using a power that few have ever heard of, there are...steps that need to be taken to prevent things from getting out of hand. I had a few Floo calls to make, as you might imagine.”

“Of course,” Severus said, though he privately felt that it could all wait. “Headmaster, why did you call me here?”

Dumbledore gazed at him over the rims of his half-moon spectacles. “Severus, I believe that you know something about the activities of Daphne Dressler. Something that you have kept secret, for whatever reason. My first instinct is to protect the woman. I have known her for a long time, Severus. I have witnessed her transformation, and I cannot say that I have not been disappointed by some of what I have seen. She has slipped dangerously close to the edge.”

Severus sighed. “Headmaster, please just get on with it.”

“Very well. Severus, is she guilty? Did she murder Thomas Avery?”

“Yes.”

“And how do you know that?”

“I know it because I arranged their meeting.”

Dumbledore looked pensive. “Go on.”

“I knew that she wanted a chance at Avery. I’ve never been that fond of the man myself. She approached me, used certain...leverage to gain my aid in her murderous crusade. She had me contact Avery, anonymously. She instructed me to arrange for Avery to be in a deserted part of the East End at a certain time, awaiting a rendezvous with another agent of the Dark Lord.”

Dumbledore nodded. “And Lucius Malfoy’s presence?”

Severus started. "I'm afraid I don't know what you are talking about, Headmaster."

"Severus, do not attempt to deceive me. Surely we are past that. I have given you my trust. It is far past time for you to return the favor."

Snape was trapped, and he knew it. "I contacted Lucius once she had gone, and told him that he should be at the same location about ten minutes after Avery had arrived."

"But you did not have him arrive in time to save Avery?"

"I couldn't make it that obvious. Dressler would probably kill me if I lured her into a trap. I had hopes that Avery might be able to fend her off until Lucius arrived. I was wrong."

Snape stared into Dumbledore's eyes. "If you are looking for an apology..."

"Do not test me, Severus," Dumbledore told him. "Your betrayal of Daphne notwithstanding..."

"The woman is a reckless vigilante at best, a cold-blooded killer at worst," Snape protested. *She deserves what she gets. She brought it upon herself when she decided to take justice into her own hands.*

"Severus, you did not do what you did out of some sense of morality," Dumbledore said. He sighed. "This is worse than I could have imagined."

"Then I daresay, Headmaster, your outlook is far too hopeful given the circumstances."

Dumbledore glared at him. He was visibly angry, something that Severus had rarely seen. "Severus, your actions were taken in the interest of petty revenge..."

"Are you here to berate me like some small child?" Snape demanded. "I will not stand here..."

“...but your actions, however reprehensible, are not of great importance in the grand scheme of things.”

“At least we are agreed on that last note,” Snape breathed. He was quietly fuming about Dumbledore’s disapproval of his choices. Dressler had murdered a man, and somehow, it was Snape refusing to overcome an old grudge that was the primary topic of conversation.

“So Daphne is guilty of the charges, then,” Dumbledore said.

“I believe I already said that.”

“Severus...”

Snape met the older man’s eyes. “Headmaster, if you are going to seek my counsel in this matter, you must put aside your notions of Daphne Dressler as some innocent, vulnerable little schoolchild. She is a trained killer, capable of compassion towards those she cares for, yes,” Snape said, distastefully adding the latter part of his assessment only out of a desire to make Dumbledore accept the truth. “But nonetheless, she is dangerous, and she is unstable. Surely her behavior over the past few years, especially in cases involving Harry, has shown you that.”

Dumbledore nodded wearily. “Her behavior has been...disturbing. The incident in the Chamber...I’d hoped that it was merely a short-term relapse into her old ways. I’d hoped that Harry’s presence might have healed the gaping wounds in her soul. But it does not seem to have been the case.

Dumbledore’s endless faith in the Grey Maiden was almost sickening to Severus, but he continued. “Daphne Dressler ambushed, tortured, and murdered Thomas Avery, Albus. This is a fact, not a theory, not a rumor, not conjecture.”

“I believe you, Severus. I almost wish that I didn’t, but you have convinced me. What should we do about it?”

Snape frowned. “Headmaster?”

"Severus, while Daphne may be gone from the grounds, Harry is still here. I believe he is recuperating in the Hospital Wing."

"Surely he's back on his feet by now."

"If he had his way, he would be, but I've asked Poppy to keep him overnight as a precaution."

Ignoring the implication that Dumbledore didn't trust him to identify whether Lucius had done anything other than use a simple Stunning Spell was difficult, but Snape managed it.

Dumbledore looked him in the eyes. "He cannot know the truth, Severus."

Snape's mind went blank for a moment. "Are you *mad*, Headmaster? How can we keep this from him? How can we allow this delusion to go on? It's *irresponsible*, Albus."

"We will not be able to keep him from learning the truth for long, I fear," Dumbledore admitted.

"All the more reason to tell him now."

"Do you think that he'd react well to that, Severus? Let alone believe it?"

"His girlfriend knows."

Dumbledore frowned. "Ginny Weasley? How?"

"Headmaster, I have my suspicions that she knows far more about Daphne's nature than she is letting on. She seems intimidated by the woman's very presence."

Dumbledore shook his head. "Something that is not altogether uncommon. The woman has a certain air about her."

"I'm afraid you don't understand. I'm almost certain that she witnessed Daphne Dressler's murder of Amycus Carrow two years

ago. And I have reason to believe that she overheard a conversation between myself and Dressler concerning the ambush after the fact.”

“Do you see her?”

“No. But someone was present, that much I could ascertain. And I’m fairly certain it was the Weasley girl. I know her, Headmaster. She is a member of my House, and despite my initial misgivings, she has been a credit to Slytherin.”

“So, you believe that Ginny Weasley will tell Harry that his guardian is not innocent, making all of this secrecy unnecessary and potentially damaging to the trust between the two of us and Harry?” Dumbledore asked.

Snape hesitated. “No.”

Dumbledore frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Weasley isn’t a coward. But she’s still easily frightened, overly anxious, and lacks self-confidence. She won’t tell Potter unless she’s forced to. She’s afraid of the consequences.”

“You are basing this off of your observations from your interactions with her?”

“Yes, Headmaster.”

Dumbledore looked thoughtful. He closed his eyes, and took a deep breath. “Perhaps we will tell him the truth. Perhaps he deserves to know the truth, even if it will be devastating to him. But now is not the time.”

“Headmaster, I strongly object-”

“Your objection is noted, Severus,” Dumbledore cut in. “But for the time being, I absolutely forbid you from discussing this matter with Harry. He’s in a difficult situation at the moment. Perhaps some distance from this will allow him to be more open minded.”

“Albus, you are making a terrible mistake,” Snape hissed. “Hiding the truth to protect him will only make it worse when the secret gets out. You are setting yourself up for a disaster.”

“I will bear that burden, Severus. It is my responsibility, and my choice. Thank you for your advice. You may go.”

“Headmaster...”

“Severus, please.”

Snape bit his tongue, spun round on his heels, and marched out of the room, fuming.

Albus Dumbledore slumped back in his chair. There was no easy choice here, no clearly correct decision. But he’d made his choice.

“Hope is our greatest ally in a time of despair, isn’t that right, Fawkes?”

The phoenix crowed.

Ginny Weasley strained to keep her quill moving across the piece of parchment before her. It was getting late, and the rate at which she was writing McGonagall’s essay, due tomorrow, first thing, was rapidly dropping, even as she neared the end. She hadn’t been able to focus for days, since Daphne had fled. A battle within her own mind was waging, a battle between her brain and her heart. And right now, the two sides had ground out nothing but a bloody stalemate. Her teachers had noticed it, with two of them, Sprout and Flitwick, pulling them aside to ask her if something was wrong. She’d made up tales of homesickness, of physical illness, of insomnia...she was just lucky that her fabrications hadn’t been discovered yet. If she kept it up at this rate, somebody was bound to realize that her stories didn’t match up.

The battle was picking up again. A truce had been declared for a short time, as Ginny faced a mountain of homework and just one evening to do it. She’d managed to calm herself, to put her emotional

issues aside like any Slytherin should be capable of. In part, she'd avoided contact with Harry, something that really didn't make her feel any better about the whole situation but kept her from thinking too much.

...and so, as Hobart the Refined demonstrated, Transfiguration on the macro-level is possible, though it remains beyond the capabilities of most adult wizards and witches. The ultimate importance of his experiments is...

Her quill stopped moving, and fell from her hand. Ginny's head slumped forward onto the table in front of her. She fought to stay awake, but that was one battle she had no chance of winning.

She became aware of a persistent low whisper, as well as something nudging her shoulder. She weakly slapped at it, and hit something, but whatever it was refused to quit. Finally, she forced her eyes open, and lifted her head. The light from the dying fire glinted off a silver badge. "...Harry?"

He grinned back at her. "Well, I look like Harry Potter. I sound like Harry Potter. I...ow...what was that for?"

"Don't make fun of me this late at night. M'brothers did, and they...well, they don't do it anymore," she forced out, yawning. "What time..?"

"Oh, just about 10 past four in the morning," Harry said, smiling, and rubbing his sore shoulder. "You pack quite a wallop this late."

"What are you...why are you up?" Ginny asked.

"Can't sleep," he said honestly. "Had a crazy patrol and the excitement's got me all wired up." There was a slight change in his inflection, and even in her muddled state, Ginny didn't miss it.

My arse! "Don't believe you," she groaned. Those patrols were normally a good way to put a person to sleep. But Harry suffered it because it was his duty as Slytherin Prefect to go around and evict couples from broom closets, as well as deter idiotic First Years from doing the kinds of stupid things that Harry had done in the past.

Rather hypocritical, but Harry hadn't asked to get the badge. She sometimes forgot that he even had one; Slytherin House demanded a certain kind of discipline from every one of its members, even the youngest, and Slytherin Prefects were almost redundant from the perspective of most in the house.

Harry sighed. "I had a nightmare, and wanted to get some air to clear my head. I didn't expect to find you down here."

His words brought Ginny closer to full consciousness. She sat up, blinking blearily. That was when she realized that she'd fallen asleep on her quill, and her hands and the sleeves of her robes were stained with ink. "Oh, bugger," she moaned.

Harry held up a hand and pulled out his wand. With a whispered incantation and a flick of his wrist, the ink was gone. "Thanks."

"No problem," he said. He looked undecided about something.

"Out with it," she told him. "Don't make me play guessing games."

"Alright then," Harry said, grinning in that way that she adored...when she wasn't half-dead. "This seems like a hell of a time to ask but...how would you like to spend Sunday in Hogsmeade? Just the two of us, not even Hermione. We haven't gotten much of a chance to do that this year, and I miss it. I miss you."

"Hell of a time is right," she groaned.

"Is that a 'yes'?" Harry asked.

She glared at him as best she could. "What bloody fool would interpret *that* as a 'yes'?"

"One that knows you'd never turn down that kind of offer, no matter how lazy you were feeling?" he offered. His expression became serious. "Honestly, Ginny, I know you've wanted us to spend more time together. I've noticed, and I'm sorry it's taken this long, and that I'm asking so soon after...everything that's happened of late. But maybe this is the perfect time. Just a day to let it all go, to be

ourselves, to forget about Daphne and this bloody war and school and everything. What do you say to that?"

Ginny shook her head. "I can't believe you sometimes."

Harry looked downcast. "You don't want to go?"

"Of course I do," she said grumpily. "But like I said before, this is not really the time one usually asks someone out on a date. Even if they are in a relationship."

Harry bent down and kissed her on the forehead. "Get some rest, Gin."

"Can't. I have to finish this."

"What's that?" he asked, looking at the parchment. "Oh, this bloody thing. Drove me up the wall. Hermione had it finished in ten seconds, of course...huh," he said, studying her writing. "You approached this in a different way that I did."

"That's wonderful. But I need to finish the conclusion."

"You can do that in the morning. You've got five or six lines left at most. Come on, Gin, don't be Hermione. You need sleep."

"Fine," she said, getting up and stretching. Her neck was tight from falling asleep on the table. That was going to bother her in the morning.

Seemingly oblivious of her physical discomfort, Harry moved around the table, bent down, and kissed her full on the lips. She was startled at first, but quickly let her instincts take over. When they broke it, she felt more alive than she had in days. She'd missed this. She'd missed *them*.

"Come on, silly little girl," Harry said, smiling and holding out his hand. She took it, and they moved toward the stairs down to the dormitories. "Good night, Gin. I'll see you in the morning."

"G'night, Harry," she yawned. He laughed a little at her, and then disappeared.

Ginny thought for a moment about going back to pack up her essay and make sure it would still be there when she got back, but decided against it. She went straight to her bed, managing not to wake her sleeping roommates.

No sooner had Harry left Ginny and collapsed onto his bed than he had awoken to his greatest nightmare.

This time, the hellish scene around him brought understanding, rather than confusion. The distant bursts of volcanic eruptions, the foul smelling gases, and the cracks and flashes of lightning were far less intimidating the second time around. Harry looked around, almost ignoring the chaotic environment. After all, it wasn't real. Well, perhaps that wasn't entirely true...but so far as he knew, his own violent subconscious hadn't yet developed the ability to kill him.

"You too?" Harry asked, trying to sound more exasperated than frightened. Kalas's very existence still unnerved him.

Kalas materialized maybe ten meters to his right, his figure still hidden by his hooded black cloak. His scarred, tattooed visage was concealed by dark shadow. His yellow and black eyes stabbed out at Harry like a pair of daggers. "Did you really expect that I would be silent?" he asked, his voice hoarse and gravelly. "Our survival was at stake."

"Our survival," Harry repeated. "Your concern for my welfare is touching."

"Do not play games with me, Harry," Kalas hissed. "I am a part of you. If you die, I die. So I have a vested interest in ensuring your survival."

"In that case, why didn't you take over from the beginning of the fight?" Harry challenged.

"Be careful what you ask for, Harry. It was not due to a lack of will on my part that I remained concealed."

"You aren't strong enough."

Kalas hissed. "It's only a matter of time, Harry."

"From what I remember, you won't get any stronger unless I continue to let my rage dictate my actions, to increase my power."

"And you can take comfort in that fact for now," Kalas replied. "But there will come a time where your resolve is tested. Your destiny lies in the Darkness, Harry. Even you cannot deny that. You are no Light wizard, motivated by a moral desire to do good and defend those weaker than yourself. You are a warrior in the midst of being forged."

"Perhaps that's true," Harry acknowledged. "But embracing Dark Magic does not mean that I'm doomed to follow Voldemort's path."

"There are many paths, Harry," Kalas told him. "The one that Voldemort took all those years ago is just one. You may begin your journey toward the Darkness without even being aware of it. That's assuming, of course, that you manage to survive your idiotic misjudgments and foolish mistakes."

Harry found his composure. "If I'm going to win this war, I have to play to my strengths. I have power. I have skill using destructive magic. I can't ignore that. If I die with the rest of our side, it won't matter what kind of person I've become; I'll be just as dead."

"Finally, you say something intelligent."

"I don't trust you."

"I don't blame you," Kalas replied. "Giving in to me would mean acknowledging that you are not strong enough, not capable of being everything that men like Aiden Dressler believe that you could be."

"And what if I believe that I can meet those expectations, without your help?" Harry challenged.

"Then I'd say you've still learned nothing from your mistakes, but that's hardly a surprise."

"My mistakes? I'd say that letting my actions be governed by unrestrained fury would be the biggest bloody mistake I'd ever made in this or any other life."

"You exaggerate."

"Do I? Do I really? You said that you were born out of my rage, that you grow stronger each and every time I tap into my anger to boost my magical abilities, every time I become so enraged that causing destruction is my only objective."

"Perhaps that has what has spared you thus far," Kalas suggested.

"I don't think so," Harry replied. "I didn't need to try to blow Voldemort and his band of merry followers to little pieces to initiate priori incantatem. A bloody Tickling Charm would have done the trick."

"And against the Dementors?"

Harry grimaced. "Well I guess I owe you my sincerest apologies. Assuming, of course, that I actually believe your account of the whole thing. I mean, you couldn't be deceiving me in the hopes of proving your value."

"Careful, Harry."

"This is a bloody dream. You can't hurt me in my own fucking dream."

"Are you sure about that?" Kalas snarled. A that instant a flash blinded him, and a river of pain ripped through Harry's body, and he collapsed to one knee, trying not to scream. Whether it was real or not was irrelevant, what mattered is that it felt real.

But when he opened his eyes, he couldn't help but smile. Even as the pained faded, he saw Kalas stagger, his body quaking with the very effort required to stand. "And you question my choices, my priorities?" He laughed. "Was it worth it, Kalas? Was it worth expending what little power you had to make me shut up?"

Kalas roared in rage and pain, and the world around them shattered.

Harry shot bolt upright. His entire body ached, almost as if he'd been hit by a Cruciatus Curse. Had the pain been real? He took a deep breath, letting it out slowly as he tried to calm his pounding heart. It was over.

But in the back of his mind, he felt something he hadn't really felt since he was lying at Voldemort's mercy in that graveyard.

Fear.

Harry pulled Ginny closer, wrapping his cloak around her to shield her from the stiff December breeze that was numbing them both. She looked up at him and smiled at the gesture, snuggling in to his shoulder as they walked. They were alone. Well, not exactly; they were surrounded by small groups of other Hogwarts students on their way to Hogsmeade, looking for some relief from the stress of schoolwork. But Hermione wasn't there; she'd stayed behind to continue her efforts to stay eight steps in front of everyone else in Transfiguration. Blaise wasn't there; he was on his own date, desperately trying to cling to what was left of his rapidly failing relationship with Elisha Moon. It had started with an awkward Yule Ball, and hadn't gotten all that much better since then. In spite of everything, Blaise was still attracted to the budding Potions prodigy, and despite herself, it seemed that she was attracted to him as well. Harry wished them luck, though, he realized, reflecting on the warm bundle of his girlfriend pressed against him, it wasn't really his concern.

"You never said where you wanted to go," Ginny reminded him, breaking his train of thought.

"Well, isn't there something to be said for improvisation?" he replied. He'd intended to plan their whole outing that morning. Unfortunately, his mind had been on overdrive as he processed his run-in with Kalas. He hadn't told Ginny about *that* yet either...he didn't want to spoil what he hoped would be a nice and relaxing day, away from the distractions and worries of the castle. Harry still found himself halfway

to Daphne's old office, hoping to have a quick chat, before he stopped and remembered what had happened. For now, her position remained vacant, although Harry had heard rumors that Fudge was already pushing his handpicked successor. He was probably hoping for a little revenge on Dumbledore, and that couldn't mean anything good.

"Stop thinking," she almost snapped at him, and he smiled guiltily. There was little point in denying it.

"Can't help it," he said. "It's what I do."

Ginny mock-scowled, and then let an evil grin capture her pretty features. "Well, today Mr. Potter, you are *all* mine, and I expect your every waking thought to be somehow related to how fortunate you are that I put up with you."

"You've got it."

"So, any thoughts?"

"About how bloody fortunate I am that you care for such a miserable human being like myself?" he asked, eyes open innocently.

She hit him, as best as she could manage while enveloped in his cloak. It was dark green with silver trim, a gift from Daphne. It was also very warm. "About where we are going when we finally get to Hogsmeade," she clarified, needlessly.

"Well, we'll definitely stop at the bookshop. And a Butterbeer would be nice. And I could use some new Quidditch pads, after the beating mine took during our last game."

"And if I said I wanted to go to Madam Puddifoot's?" Ginny asked.

Harry grimaced. "I'd wonder what had come over you, but I'd go along with it."

She smiled. "Good answer. Fortunately for both of us, I have no such desire. But I do want to spend some time at Gladrags. It'll be nice to have my own private judge to tell me what looks good on me."

"I'm assuming that will be me?"

"I mean, I could always ask Neville. I doubt he'd mind."

The two looked at each other, and burst out laughing.

"That'll work," Harry told the attendant at Quality Quidditch Supplies, as he finished adjusting the strap on Harry's new set of knee guards. "And the shin guards feel fine as well."

"Good range of motion?" Harry nodded. "Any tightness?"

"Nothing beyond what I'm used to," Harry told the man. He flexed his leg just to make sure. He winced slightly; his legs were still sore from the injuries he'd incurred that had required the replacement pads in the first place. In the process of tailing the Snitch, he'd nearly collided with Anne Grunitch, and ended up crashing headlong into the turf. His Firebolt lived up to its reputation, emerging unscathed. His own body wasn't so fortunate, nor was his well-worn equipment. He'd managed to get back on his broom, but he'd been slowed by the pain he was in, and Cho Chang had beaten him to the Snitch, resulting in Slytherin's first loss in which Harry played the entire game. It was disappointing, especially because Gryffindor had won their first two games, setting up a major showdown after the holiday break.

As Harry waved off the over-anxious worker, who was giving him the much-hated celebrity treatment, he turned to Ginny, who was standing a few meters away, staring longingly at a pair of top-of-the-line Chaser's gloves, which had magical pads that made a player's grip on the ball as solid as could be. They were also, given her family's financial situation, far too expensive for her to afford. Harry, who'd never really given Ginny a real birthday present in the first place (mostly because he was cooped up in Sirius's home and hadn't the forethought to buy something beforehand), decided to settle the issue. "They're yours," he said.

She turned around, looking terribly anxious. "Harry..."

"Gin, it's not charity. Hasn't a guy such as myself the right to buy some nice things for his girlfriend? Especially when your having the best hands of anyone on the bloody team is of great value to me?"

Ginny looked reluctant, but gave in. "Thanks," she said shyly.

"It's a late birthday present," Harry told her, trying to put her at ease. Ginny had long ago accepted the reality of her family's situation, with her father locked into a job he loved, but one that barely paid enough to support their large family. But Arthur Weasley prided himself on being able to make do on his own, Harry knew, and that determination had been passed on to his children. Harry undid the bindings on the leg guards and told the attendant to get a pair of the new gloves in the smallest size they had. Ginny tried them on. Her eyes lit up as she picked up a demonstration Quaffle and whipped it around, effortlessly keeping it firmly within her grasp with just one hand. "Wow," she breathed, impressed.

Harry paid for their purchases, and they moved on. The next stop was the bookstore. Harry immediately dug into the Wizarding history section, searching for more information about Goblins. He knew it would come in handy some day...or at least he hoped it did, given the trouble he'd gone through to access such knowledge. The Miner books had exceeded his wildest expectations, giving him the kind of unbiased glimpse into the everyday life and culture of England's goblins that couldn't be found anywhere else.

Ginny was a very intelligent and literate young woman, but she didn't share Harry's burning curiosity or academic drive, so it was she, as usual, who convinced him to leave the ever-growing pile of books he was thumbing through. One of the booksellers merely waved his wand to return all of the books to their proper place. Ginny managed to drive Harry out of the store without buying anything.

The next few hours passed in a blur. They went from Zonko's to Gladrags, even stopping briefly at a bunch of third year Ravensclaws outside the Shrieking Shack, cautiously moving toward the fenced-off dwelling as one might approach the cave of a dragon. Harry found it somewhat incomprehensible that years and years after Remus had last used it, the locals, and by extension, the Hogwarts students that visited on certain weekends, still thought it well and truly haunted. *By what, precisely?* There was certainly no suspicion of the real cause of the roars and shrieks that had emanated from the building so many years ago.

They'd grabbed Butterbeers at the Three Broomsticks, where they'd encountered several people they knew, notably Hagrid and Dumbledore, chatting amiably over some drinks. Harry hadn't seen much of the half-giant recently; he'd been absent at the beginning of the year, and there had been rumors that he'd been sent on an ultimately unsuccessful mission to the Giants. Honestly, the more he learned about them, the less he believed that they could ever be drawn away from Voldemort. Their brutish, violent ways were an ingrained element of their society. Their cruelty was not merely a reflection of the way they'd been mistreated by the Wizarding world; the terror they inspired was rooting in terrible and destructive attacks they'd made on small villages long before they were all banished to the mountains, permanently separated from wizardkind. The biggest problem was that, unlike goblins, centaurs or even house elves, giants just weren't that intelligent. Hagrid, hardly the most intellectual person he'd ever met, had gotten most of his average brains from his human father, not his giantess mother. Harry had become increasingly convinced that trying to impose conventional moral standards on giants, trying to "educate" them was not only not feasible given the current circumstances, but probably unwise.

Harry's active mind was dragged back to the present by Ginny, as they enjoyed a pleasant meal, talking about all manner of less important and worrying things, like her family, a few childhood memories, and the like. It was relaxing, in a way that Harry hadn't really experienced in some time.

Ginny leaned against his shoulder, sighing contentedly. At the end of a long day of rest and relaxation, they sat together on one of the comfortable green couches in the Slytherin Common Room, which was mercifully deserted. She stretched up and kissed his cheek. Harry playfully tickled her middle. She giggled, and shoved against him. "Stop it," she whined.

"Why should I?" Harry asked.

"Because I told you to," Ginny said assertively. "And because today is all about what I want."

"Can't argue with that logic," he said, defeated. He closed his eyes as he lay back on the couch.

She laughed, and he opened his eyes to look down at her. "What?"

"You're so happy," she said, smiling brightly. "I haven't seen you this happy in ages."

"Well what's not to be happy about?"

"You've been different since Daphne left," Ginny continued. "More distracted, more...well, you've been downright miserable at times."

Harry sighed. "I guess I have. It's been...difficult. I got so used to having her around. And for all this bloody nonsense to get in the way...who does Fudge think he is? Since when is listening to a creature like Lucius Malfoy a sound policy decision?"

Ginny shrugged against him.

"It isn't fair," Harry continued. "It's not fair that he can just use these trumped up charges to ruin her life like this. She'd been getting better, more focused. Hogwarts was good for her. And now she's alone, on her own, forced to fend for herself. And I can't do a damn thing about it."

"Your place is here," she reassured him. "She'd want you to think about yourself."

"How can you know that?" he demanded. She just gave him a look. That was all that was needed. He sighed. "You're right. Again."

"I know her...and I know you. It doesn't take a genius to figure it out. She wouldn't want you to worry. She's strong. She'll manage."

Harry nodded silently, closing his eyes. But his anger and frustration just wouldn't go away. The wound had been opened, however inadvertently, and blood was flowing. "Ginny, I just can't accept it. She didn't do it, she's innocent. Maybe there was a time in the past where she might have killed people like that...but not anymore. I...I saved her, I suppose. By caring for me, she let herself heal."

"Yeah," Ginny said, her voice oddly lacking in conviction. She nodded against him. He wasn't finished.

"There's got to be something I can do. Fudge...this is the last straw. The man's a coward, easily manipulated. I can make a difference. I can bring him down."

"Harry, you should know something..." Ginny said quietly. He didn't really hear her.

"I could talk to Aiden. He could set things in motion. Fudge thwarted a possible coup from inside the Ministry, but he's got no control of radical forces outside of the Ministry. With Voldemort's return, I doubt many will resist an overthrow of the government. We've got no chance of surviving with Fudge at the helm. If we don't change the balance of power, we can get a better government without any kind of popular revolt."

Ginny wiggled her way out of Harry's arms, and jump off of the couch. "What's wrong?" Harry asked.

"Listen to yourself," Ginny said, her voice rising. "You're talking about overthrowing the government! And worse, you're doing it for revenge! It's all about a woman who's done all the things..." she trailed off, a horrified look coming over her features.

Harry stared at her. "What? What are you saying?" Ginny shook her head. "What are you *saying*, Ginny? Are you calling Daphne a murderer? You can't believe all that rubbish. It's a lie!" he almost yelled at her.

"But it isn't!" she cried, tears coming to her eyes. "I saw it! I saw it! She's a monster, Harry."

Harry began breathing faster and faster. "You...shut your mouth. You don't know what you are saying. It isn't true, Ginny. Daphne wouldn't do those things!"

"But she did!" Ginny protested. "You have to believe me!"

"NO!" Harry roared. "Shut up. Right now."

"She's a monster, Harry! She has to be stopped! Maybe not like this, but..."

"*That's enough*," he hissed. "Don't say *anything* else."

"It's the truth! You haven't seen what I've seen! I saw her kill someone in cold blood! I heard Snape talking! She's a murderer! *She's not any better than them!*" she shrieked.

Harry snapped. His wrist flicked, shooting his wand into his right hand.

"*I SAID THAT'S ENOUGH!*"

As if the force of his rage had been channeled through his right arm and then into the wand that was now pointed at the chest of the small, hysterical redhead in front of him, a bolt of power blasted outward and hurled Ginny like a rag doll into the cold stone of the Common Room wall. As she slid down, almost in slow motion, Harry couldn't help but be reminded of the terrible similarities between this incident and the one that had landed Tonks in the Hospital for a week. His wand arm, still thrust outward at Ginny's fallen form, collapsed downward. The pounding in his ears became softer, even as his breathing sped up to the point of hyperventilation. His mind was frozen, unable to process the sight before him. His wand tumbled from his fingertips, and he stared down at it, as if it had suddenly, after years of faithful service, betrayed him.

There was *pain*. *So much pain*. Her head felt like it was going to explode, and she cried out, though it came out as only a weak moan. How, why she'd ended up here almost didn't matter. She tried to open her eyes, tried to fend off the agony that was tearing through her skull.

"Ginny...Gods, Ginny, please..."

Harry.

In a flash, the events of the day came roaring back at her, almost overwhelming Ginny and sending her back into the bliss of

unconsciousness. But she fought to stay awake and aware, and barely won. Through her blurred vision, she saw Harry's hand reaching out to touch her.

She jerked back, almost reflexively. The motion didn't agree with her throbbing head, but that didn't stop her. "*Get away,*" she begged. Harry looked stunned. The color had almost completely drained from his face. Ginny struggled to get to her feet.

"Ginny, you're hurt, you shouldn't..." he started. She silenced him with a weak glare. In his state, it was enough. She stumbled out of the Slytherin dormitory, navigating more by memory than by sensory input.

"Ginny, *please...*" Harry pleaded.

She ignored him, fighting her way, centimeter by agonizing centimeter, to the door. It slid open, and she fell through it. She collapsed to the ground, and realized that getting to the Hospital Wing under her own power was going to be damn near impossible in her injured state. She thought she might be badly hurt, maybe even dying. She'd been stupid to leave Harry. He could have helped her. He *would* have helped her. He cared about her...

"Ginny? What happened to you?"

It was Anne.

Anne Grunitch was still fuming long after she'd finally left the side of that deplorable rat known as Filch. She'd been sent to detention on stupid, trumped up charges by one of the Ravenclaw Prefects. Apparently testing a new wand with a bloody Lighting Charm was a punishable offense these days. Her old wand had been badly damaged in an accident over the summer, and she'd stubbornly refused to get a new one as long as it still worked. Eventually, though, her wand's performance had degraded to the point where she'd been forced to have it replaced. Her new wand, one she'd actually gotten during the summer, had arrived in the post that morning.

Twenty minutes later, before Hogsmeade had been opened to students, she'd been given detention by a bespectacled, arrogant Ravenclaw she'd never seen before.

So, after needlessly (she felt) cleaning dozens of trophies, medals, and pendants, she was finally headed to bed. She made her way down to the dungeons, wondering why Fudge had decided that ten o'clock in the evening was a good time to start the dreadfully boring task. He'd made plenty of derogatory comments in the meantime, though Anne thought his efforts to humiliate her were rather pathetic. She often wondered why Filch was even kept around. Surely a more pleasant human being could do the job just as well.

She heard the hidden door to the Slytherin dormitories slide open with the light grinding of stone upon stone. She hurried to try and catch the door before it closed again. But she stopped dead when the dim light from the rows of torches on the dungeon walls illuminated a terrible sight.

Her friend Ginny was lying on her stomach, groaning and moaning. The back of her head was slick with something that might have been blood. "Ginny? What happened to you?" she asked. "Ginny, are you okay?"

"Anne..." she moaned. "Help."

Anne bent down to pick up her friend. Her limp body didn't resist. "I'll get you to the Hospital Wing, Ginny. I'll get you there. Don't worry. Stay with me."

"Thanks..." she said weakly.

Anne tried to avoid even beginning to ponder what could have happened to leave Ginny in this state. Last Anne had seen her, she'd been happily laughing and in the arms of her boyfriend, Harry Potter. Did *he* have something to do with this?

"Ginny? Ginny?" she asked. "Who did this? What happened?"

There was no response. Ginny was out cold. Anne quickly confirmed that she was still breathing. But it was weak...and only getting worse.

She quickened her pace.

A/N: Well, that was interesting! Honestly, if any of you were under the impression that Harry and Ginny's relationship would be somehow shielded from the angst that's fairly permeated the rest of this series, I'm a bit surprised. The divide that caused the events of this chapter has been around for a while, festering like an unhealed wound, but something that Ginny desperately wanted to keep under wraps. That didn't work out so well.

I know I said something about doing away with the long author's notes. I do feel that they might add something here.

I think something that needs to be understood before we go any further is that while Harry and Ginny have some things in common, and complement one another quite well, Ginny is not and was never really intended to be the kind of warrior that Harry is/will be. Her future is not guided by destiny, as Harry's seems to be. She can fight well enough to defend herself. She's quite intelligent, pretty powerful, and a hard worker. But I'd even venture that Hermione is better suited to war than is the Ginny I've created.

That said, Ginny's role is greater than merely that of the love of Harry Potter's life. She is an integral character to this story, even if she isn't ultimately destined to smite Death Eaters left and right. In a lot of ways, she's terribly out of place. One of the reason she complements Harry is that the things they share, notably Quidditch, help provide a badly-needed balance to the trappings of destiny and war. Ginny has her role to play. She will become a strong character in her own right, independent to Harry, to an extent. That said, she'll always feel out of place, because the reality is that Ginny Weasley was not born to fight a war in her teenage years. I'm not going to try to make her Harry's equal in battle and leadership, standing by his side until the end of days. In a way, that role almost belongs to Hermione more than anyone else. Ginny's terrified and overwhelmed by the situation she find herself in. This latest incident is just the last one. And one, as you might expect, that will have long-term consequences on their relationship.

Back to something that led a few of you to express great dismay: Harry's back-turning blunder. Rest assured that it was noticed, and it will cause some to question, as a number of you have, whether he'll ever be able to fight and win this war. I'd caution you to realize that Harry's ordeal isn't over. Not by a long shot. What he's gone through so far is almost tame compared to some of the horrors he'll face in the future. It isn't fun to be the sole target of the most powerful Dark wizard in centuries. Those experiences may affect him so much as to render certain aspects of his personality unrecognizable from the young man that used a Disarming Spell to end the Final Battle in Rowling's canon. When I said I was radically breaking away from canon at the end of book five, I wasn't kidding.

Well, as for the rest of the chapter, there's a lot of character development and Harry-related hand-wringing. And Kalas being angry. He's really more of a distraction right now than a true threat, but every time Harry gives in to his anger, he gets stronger. Bugger, that.

Until next time.

Chapter 12: Promises to Keep

Harry staggered out of the Slytherin Common Room the next morning, his mind still spinning out of control. He hadn't slept since the previous night, and he felt like he was moving through a dream world...or a nightmare.

He was staring at the floor when he sensed the presence of someone familiar. He stopped and looked up.

Staring down at the pathetic sight that was her best friend was Hermione, her lips pressed into a thin line. Harry's robes were creased and off-kilter, his hair was mussed, and there were dark circles under his eyes.

"Hermione," Harry managed to gasp.

"Harry," she replied, coldly.

Harry tried to ask the question he desperately needed an answer for, but failed to get the words out of his mouth. He just stared helplessly at her. Hermione seemed to understand.

"She's alive, Harry. Fractured skull and a nasty concussion, but she's alive."

Harry's mind went into overdrive. The news that Ginny had been badly injured by his outburst threatened to overwhelm him, and might have without the intense feeling of relief that passed over him when he learned that the worst had not come to pass.

"What happened?" Hermione asked, throwing her hands down toward the ground. "How could you do that to her? I know you. You aren't that kind of person."

Harry couldn't meet her eyes.

"Harry, what happened?" she asked again. "What did you do?"

“What do you want me to say?” Harry demanded, his voice hoarse.

Hermione shook her head. “I don’t know. I can’t understand how this happened.”

“I lost control,” Harry admitted. “I got angry with what she was saying...it couldn’t be true, I was sure of it...she had to be wrong. I just couldn’t...I didn’t want to hear it. I wanted her to stop...” he said, desperately trying to hold back tears.

Hermione shifted as if to come and comfort her best friend, but stood her ground. “Harry, what are you talking about? What was she saying?”

“Daphne,” Harry almost spat. “Daphne. She lied to me. She...I still can’t believe it. I don’t want to believe it!”

“I don’t understand...”

“She said...she said that Daphne killed Avery.”

Hermione didn’t really react. “What can I say, Harry, that I’m surprised? I’m not. Honestly, if I’d really thought about it before, I would have realized it was entirely plausible.”

“I can’t believe it’s come to this. I never wanted to hurt her. Merlin, the last thing I ever wanted was to cause her pain...” he tried to fight back the anguish in his voice, but it was a losing effort.

“I know,” Hermione said softly. “I never thought otherwise, even for an instant.”

“I should go to her,” he said, almost more to himself than anyone else. “I need to make sure she knows that I feel just bloody awful, that it won’t happen again...”

Hermione held up her hands. “Harry,” she said firmly, snapping him back to the present. “She knows. Trust me, she knows.”

“Did she say..?”

“Not in so many words,” Hermione admitted. “But I could see it in her eyes. She’s scared, and she’s confused. But she’s not angry.”

“Somehow I doubt that,” Harry replied grimly. “She’s got plenty to be angry about.”

“Well, she’s not angry with you,” Hermione assured him. “You don’t need to go up there and apologize, Harry. It won’t do any good. She doesn’t need to hear you speak the words to know that you probably won’t ever forgive yourself for this.”

“Hermione, I just want to talk to her.”

She shook her head, sadly. “Harry, I just don’t think that’s a good idea. I think that what’s best for both of you right now is separation. The less you see of her, and vice versa, the better off you’ll be.”

“Hermione, what are you saying?” Harry demanded. “I’m not giving up on us, and Ginny sure as hell isn’t.”

“It’s nothing permanent,” Hermione assured him. “It’s just...you both have a lot of issues to work through. I’m friends with both of you. Just trust me on this, Harry. Please?”

Harry sighed. He wasn’t sure she was right, but he was hardly in a position to argue. “Alright. I’ll do it.”

Hermione’s expression was one of intense relief. Clearly, she’d been expecting him to put up more of a fight. “We should get to breakfast if we want to grab something before Potions.”

They made it to Potions on time, after Harry consumed a meager breakfast and did his best to become invisible. He paid not the slightest attention to anyone around him. On occasions that he saw the faces of other students out of the corner of his eye, he saw looks

of disappointment and disapproval. It was silly, irrational, he knew, but the guilt, the realization that he'd been duped by someone so close to him, and that he'd mindlessly thrown away his gift of rational thought when it came to her, and the horror that he'd nearly killed someone so close to him, was overwhelming. He felt lost, adrift...angry. And he didn't know what to do about it.

Daphne was gone, out of sight even if she wasn't out of mind. And as furious as Harry was, he still had no desire to see her locked up in the basement of Fudge's ministry. She needed help. He didn't know if she could be saved, but he wasn't going to give up before he was sure that she was lost. Her actions were wrong, criminal, and though he felt that her motives partially insulated her from the charge, Ginny's assertion that she wasn't any better than the Death Eaters she hunted hit uncomfortably close to home.

Harry wasn't even sure what they were supposed to be doing by the time Snape snapped at them to start working. He hurriedly scrutinized the notes on the blackboard as Hermione waited for instructions. She was capable of doing it herself, but Harry often had suggestions or alternate ingredients that would mean the difference between an average drought and an exceptional one. He frowned as he tried to catch up. He hadn't brewed anything like this before. It wasn't particularly complicated or lengthy, though it did demand precise attention to detail and included a number of quite volatile and dangerous ingredients. Still, he couldn't come up with a close approximation based on his past experience. It wasn't the first time, but these instances had become increasingly rare.

"Harry? Any suggestions?" Hermione asked from the seat next to him.

"Well...we could...no, that's not going to work. The temperature's too high; might melt the bloody cauldron..." He felt his forehead breaking out into a sweat that was immediately chilled by the cold air of the dungeon. "Actually..." he trailed off, realizing that his last idea was foolish and would never have worked.

“Harry? Come on, Harry, you need to focus. Snape was saying this kind of Potion is commonly a part of the O.W.L. Potions exam.”

“Just give me a second, Hermione,” Harry replied crossly. If I add less of the red heather extract, increase the temperature for the fourth step, then rapidly cool it...no, you idiot, that will make it less potent, not more, he chastised himself. “Bloody hell, I can’t think,” he whispered.

“Let’s just go with the instructions on the board,” Hermione suggested. “I’ll get the ingredients. We can go back for others if you get an idea.”

“Yeah, go ahead,” Harry said, trying to fix his mind around the potion. He caught Snape staring at him out of the corner of his eye. His expression was subtle, but Harry saw equal parts disappointment and confusion that his second-best student seemed at a loss to come up with an inventive solution to a relatively simple problem.

Ginny would tell me not to think so much, Harry mused. That opened up another mental doorway he’d very much wanted to keep closed.

Hermione returned with a tray full of ingredients. “Harry? Why haven’t you started the cauldron boiling?”

“Sorry,” he said quickly, casting a quick Ignition Charm to ignite the dry timber beneath Hermione’s cauldron.

Hermione gave him a concerned look, but said nothing. Harry checked the temperature of the water, and found he’d overdone the charm. He cooled it slightly, leveling it out at the optimum temperature. He felt slightly embarrassed.

They went through the first five steps, adding ingredients, stirring the cauldron to insure they dissolved properly and in the right sequence, monitoring and changing the temperature to retain their potency, and preparing other ingredients to be added later.

Harry kept trying to rethink the initial instructions, and to his frustration discovered several possible alternatives that he could have used at the start, but none he could use given how far along they were.

Harry was getting angry. With himself, with Hermione for not having the intuition for Potions that he possessed and protesting every deviation from the written instructions because he wouldn't (or couldn't) explain why they were necessary, with Daphne, with Snape, with his wandering thoughts, with Voldemort for making him fight this bloody war, with Fudge for his cowardly, self-interested, pigheadedness, with Ginny...

"Harry!" Hermione cried in alarm. Tendrils of flame were slithering up the side of the cauldron like fiery serpents, inching toward the unfinished, raw and very volatile sludge that made up the first part of this potion. Harry's mind instantly remembered that the danger came not only from the risk of the sludge igniting, but the invisible fumes it gave off, fumes that, because they were heavier than the air around them, had a tendency to sink...

The flames reached the rim and there was a sudden loud crack. Harry instantly slammed his body into Hermione's, hurling them both to the stone floor of the dungeon as the flames and the potion completed their unholy union. A burning flash exploded out of the cauldron as the contents were vaporized in a fraction of a second, resulting in a massive and violent release of energy. He pulled himself on top of Hermione, shielding her from the blast. He felt a wave of heat sear across his back, and the pain that came with one being on fire.

Snape was there faster than Harry would have thought possible, and the fiery heat on his back vanished. The look in his eyes changed from concern to rage as Harry rolled off of Hermione, who'd hit the ground hard and was a bit shaken up. "Potter," he hissed. "What in the name of Merlin do you think you were doing?"

"A mistake, sir," Harry replied curtly, picking himself off the floor. "A very foolish mistake."

“That wasn’t just a mistake, Potter. You are one of my best...where do you think you are going?”

Harry didn’t know or care. He didn’t even bother to gather his things, or check that Hermione was alright. He needed to get out. He moved toward the door.

“Get back here! Potter! POTTER!” Snape roared. He felt a resistance to his movements, and spun around, hitting Snape with a short burst of his magic, slapping him like a whip. It broke whatever spell the Potions master had been attempting, and caused him to stagger back. The just made him more furious.

Harry had reached the door before he spoke again. He ignored his roars to return and explain himself. In a dark corner of his mind, her heard his surname being shouted over and over by the enraged ex-Death Eater.

He didn’t care.

Harry screamed. He hacked brutally at the plaster dummy that the Room of Requirement had provided, cleaving it in two. Another dummy came at him, clumsily wielding a large sword. Harry blocked the initial blow, swept it aside, decapitated the dummy with one sweeping stroke, and then wove the sword back around to bury the blade deep inside the practice dummy, before ripping it out. Its structural integrity utterly destroyed, the plaster figure collapsed. The last scream died in his throat, leaving it raw and painful. Harry was glad for that. Pain was good. Pain reminded you that you were still alive.

He saw motion to his left, and instinctively swung his weapon at it, coming in for an attack that would take out both knees. This time, his blade was met, and the clang of metal echoed throughout. He put the force of his body behind his movements, and threw it off like a feather, before making a vicious thrust toward the attacker’s head. It was also parried, to his frustration, and this time with more force than he

expected. "Merlin, Harry, a little aggressive, are we?" a familiar voice called out.

He stepped back, taking his top hand off the sword and allowing the weight to hang by his side. "Sorry, Blaise."

"Bloody right you should be sorry. If Dad hadn't gotten on me about learning how to use these rutting things, I'd have no head," his friend grumbled.

"Serves you right to take a hack at me while I'm practicing," Harry countered.

Blaise shrugged. "Fair enough."

Harry panted as exhaustion caught up with him. "How long have I been at this?"

"Lost track of time, have you? Oh, I'd say quite a while. Potions ended twenty minutes ago, and it wasn't half over when you stormed out."

Harry smiled wryly. "So, Snape didn't cancel class because I ticked him off?"

"Not this time, no," Blaise replied with a smile.

Harry's grin faltered. "How's Hermione?"

"She's fine," Blaise assured him. "A bit shaken up, but you got the worst of the whole thing."

"How bad is it?" he asked. He hadn't bothered to see how badly his clothing had been burned. He'd had far too much aggression to work out.

"You're not wearing those robes again, Potter," Blaise said. "Looks like Snape put it out fast enough to prevent burns, though it'll probably hurt."

“I’ll be fine,” Harry assured him. “I’ve had worse.”

“That you have,” Blaise said, looking around the room. He whistled, “Wow. This is destruction on a pretty wide scale, mate. Good thing there wasn’t another living, breathing human being in here before I foolishly got in your way.”

“I needed this,” Harry said.

“Feeling better?”

“Some,” Harry replied. “My mind’s just a mess right now, Blaise. And for once in my life, I just don’t know what to do about it. Things have gone straight to hell and I barely understand why.”

“I know, Harry,” Blaise told him. “And I guess I’m sorry I didn’t say anything sooner.”

That got Harry’s attention. “You knew? About Daphne? And you didn’t say anything?” His anger was rising again, and if Blaise wasn’t careful, with the way things were going, he might yet lose his head.

“Harry, I hear things. And I’m not stupid. As for why I didn’t say anything, first, I didn’t know for sure, and second...I mean, I’ve no desire to end up embedded in the walls of this castle.”

“So you know about Ginny, too,” Harry said quietly. “Does everyone by now?”

“No,” Blaise told him. “Just a few people know what really happened. I mean, plenty of people know that Ginny’s in Hospital Wing with a head injury, but that doesn’t implicate you. I mean, the last anyone saw of you two, you were the happiest couple on the planet.”

“Yeah,” Harry said, his mind drifting back to that time that felt so long ago, despite the fact that not even 24 hours had passed.

“Hermione told me.”

Harry stared at him. “Say that again? Hermione told you?”

Blaise laughed. “Sounds pretty absurd, doesn’t it? Well, we ran into each other this morning. I had to get up to finish a letter for one of my cousins, and I was coming back from mailing it when I ran into her near the Hospital Wing. She was in a pretty sorry state. I didn’t expect her to pour her soul out to me in any case, though.”

Harry sighed. “She seemed a bit more composed when I first saw her. Maybe that’s why.”

Blaise paced around a bit before speaking again. “Harry, you’ve got to talk to Snape. Forget walking out of his class, though I’d be sure to apologize for that too. Maybe he could help you with everything else. The man’s got a gift, I suppose, for getting you to see sense on a lot of things.”

Harry frowned. “And how would you know that? As far I can tell, you’ve always been at odds with him.”

Blaise shrugged. “Well, you know, things change. I went to him against my own judgment, and it worked out. Maybe it can do the same for you.”

Harry was a bit impressed by his friend’s maturation. Blaise wasn’t good at letting go of grudges in general, and that he’d even considered going to Snape for advice, let alone actually going through with it, spoke volumes. And on top of that, he could be right: maybe Snape, who honestly seemed to be the last person to offer any kind of suggestions involving a moral quandary, could actually be of some help. At the very least, given their history, he wouldn’t be very high-minded about the entire affair.

“Harry,” Blaise asked, interrupting his train of thought. “Are you worried that this whole thing might reflect very poorly on you? In the minds of certain people?”

Harry's first instinct was to reply that it made him look like a horrible person to just about everyone, but then he realized, with a sinking feeling, where this was going. "I hadn't really thought of it that way."

"I'm not trying to make you feel worse," Blaise assured him. "But I'd rather you worry about it now than be utterly blindsided when it happens. Look, I've really got no right to talk about accomplishments, or maturity, seeing as I seriously lack in both. But you know what? My failings are my own failings. Maybe my parents are disappointed that I haven't done more, shown more, earned the respect that my family name and bloodlines should give me. But honestly, I'm not trying to impress anyone. I'm trying to be happy with myself, find a place where I'm comfortable and I can first discover what I can be and then have a chance to become it."

"I know that, Blaise. And I think you aren't giving yourself enough credit for how much you've grown."

Blaise didn't seem interested in praise. "Harry, you are missing the point entirely. It may not be fair, but you've got to do something. I don't know what, I don't know how. I'm sorry I don't have an answer for those questions. But you can't just be content with what you are. Yes, you are amazingly powerful. Yes, you wiped the floor with Malfoy. Yes, you've somehow survived a half-dozen brushes with death. That'd be plenty for some people. But you have to strive for more, you have to accomplish more...and honestly...I feel awful for even saying this, but, outside of things I just listed, what have you done?"

Harry froze, feeling like his friend had just thrust a dagger into his gut and twisted it just to make sure he was really dead. "Blaise, don't...I haven't...you have to..."

He couldn't even string a sentence together. He tried to force the words of his impassioned defense out, point out the holes in his friend's logic, and comfort himself with the knowledge that it wasn't as bad as it seemed.

But he couldn't do it.

At that instant, it became inescapably clear that his world had imploded.

Harry had wondered that night, and the next night, and the next night, whether it was possible for things to get any worse. He'd stayed awake for hours, his imagination conjuring up nightmare scenarios (no help from Kalas required), until he'd fallen into an exhausted sleep.

Four days after his world had been shattered, he found out the answer.

At breakfast, Dumbledore made a surprising announcement. "Defense Against the Dark Arts class, which has been suspended for the last few weeks, will be resumed starting today. Each of you is expected to attend your own class at the scheduled time." Something about Dumbledore's tone worried Harry. The obvious question was who was filling in for Daphne? Could Remus have returned at Dumbledore's behest? Had Alastor Moody reconsidered his decision to leave teaching permanently? Was Dumbledore himself acting in Daphne's place?

Harry wasn't the only one who wanted answers to those questions. Hermione was verbally speculating, though he didn't pay any attention to the particulars. He really hadn't paid much attention to Hermione at all, recently. He'd sealed himself in, as he'd done at the end of his 4th year. He still wasn't sure that had been a mistake, and so far, he was convinced that he'd made the right choice. Blaise's comments had been devastatingly accurate, and also made it obvious that these sorts of things were up to Harry alone. Of course, if he wanted to accomplish any significant, he would need help. But unless he provided the impetus, there would be no need for outside help.

Harry, book bag slung over his shoulder, entered Daphne's classroom, and frowned. His first impression was that the room was remarkably unchanged, which was a bit surprising given that he hadn't been in this room since the day Daphne had evaded arrest. There were some differences, though, notably the absence of the

amusingly-cartoonish Auror recruitment poster, dating back to the 1950s that his guardian had somehow acquired, and the "Official Wizards' Code of Dueling" that had occupied the space on the wall behind Daphne's desk.

His second impression was that he had to be dreaming, because it simply wasn't possible that the woman standing at the head of the classroom was actually here. Then again, the world had turned upside-down of late, so should he really have been surprised that Fudge's pet Dolores Umbridge, in all her fluffy pink glory, was standing arrogantly where his guardian should have been. Her eyes locked with his. He didn't give an inch. "You are late, Mr. Potter," she said. Which was technically true; class had started two minutes ago, though it was common knowledge among students that Snape and McGonagall were really the only two professors who actually started class on time, and didn't tolerate a few stragglers apologetically slipping in after the bell had rung.

"I'm sorry about that, Professor," Harry said with all the politeness he could possibly muster. He didn't move an inch. He caught Hermione anxiously urging him to give in and sit down.

"Mr. Potter, I will kindly ask you to take your seat. Your celebrity status may earn you leniency elsewhere, but as far as I am concerned, you are just another student."

Harry decided that it really wasn't worth making a scene, and found his seat beside Hermione, who looked at him disapprovingly.

"Hem hem." That quirk was particularly annoying, Harry thought, because she neither needed to clear her throat nor was actually competing for attention in the silent classroom. "Well, after that little incident, I think it's time that I introduce myself. My name is Dolores Umbridge. I serve as Senior Undersecretary to the Minister, though I have temporarily given up that position so that I can serve as your instructor. I feel that is my duty to return your education to something resembling Ministry standards and teach this class in a manner appropriate to young wizards and witches such as yourselves. This dangerous, reckless instruction involving some illegal spells is a

disgrace, and I can only apologize that we at the Ministry did not deal with it sooner. Fear-mongering is no way to educate children. From the sound of it, you might as well have been Aurors training to go into battle. Well, I assure you that you won't have to fear such methods and ideas while I am teaching you."

She tapped her wand on the desk, and a textbook materialized on the desks of each student. Most were shocked and let out gasps of awe and surprise. Harry was unimpressed. He'd known that the books were there the entire time, shrunk and invisible, but nonetheless present. There were advantages to possessing the kind of power he had, one of which was that any strong magical field stood out like a beacon.

The silver-embossed title of the book was Defensive Magical Theory. That, combined with Umbridge's little soap-box address, left little to the imagination. Harry's world had just gotten worse.

"Open up your books to Chapter 1: Basics for Beginners. I think that you could all use a little refresher in the practical uses of defensive magic. There are no dark forces out to harm you. We teach Defense precisely to allow students to defend themselves and those closest to them. But what you have been learning is how to fight offensively. This is why we have Aurors."

"And if the Aurors are nowhere to be found?" Harry whispered loudly under his breath. The whole class heard him, and so did Umbridge. He didn't care.

"Mr. Potter, do you have a problem with my teaching methods? I assure you that I am far more qualified than your guardian, and have not been charged with murder."

She was baiting him. He felt Hermione's hand on his arm. "I suppose that the walls of Azkaban just dematerialized and allowed those prisoners to escape, then? They must have been champion swimmers, to survive that long in the North Sea. No wonder you haven't caught any of them yet."

Umbridge looked like she was going to explode, literally. “Mr. Potter, detention. Be silent and complete your reading. We will discuss these matters at a later time.”

“Yes, it will be so much easier to rant at me when there’s no one around to hear my defense, won’t it?”

“Harry...” Hermione warned, the grip on his arm becoming stronger. The rest of the class had long since abandoned their textbooks. Some had never opened them to begin with. All eyes were focused on the battle of wills taking place between their new teacher and the Boy-Who-Lived.

“Mr. Potter, I have already assigned you detention. Another outburst and I will have to take you to the Headmaster!”

“And who do you think he’d side with?” Harry demanded, the level of his voice rising. “His trusted pupil or the half-witted stooge of a man so terrified of losing his position that he won’t admit that Voldemort’s returned?”

There were gasps from around the classroom, some from Harry’s uttering of the Dark Lord’s name, others out of shock as Harry upped the ante. Umbridge was turning purple with rage.

“MR. POTTER! YOU WILL STOP TELLING THESE LIES AT ONCE!” she shrieked. Many in the room winced. A banshee’s cry might be more pleasant.

Harry sat up, breaking the grip that Hermione had on his arm, and strode toward the front of the room. Umbridge jerked back in true terror, retreating as he marched inexorably forward, his face a mask of cold rage. He stopped just inches from her face. With great flourish, he yanked down the sleeves of his robe covering his right arm, revealing the ghastly scars from Voldemort’s Flesh-Shredding Curse for all to see, which brought another gasp from the students in the classroom. “Is this a lie, professor? Do you think I did this to myself? A little accident, perhaps? The same kind of accident that left Cedric

Diggory a stone-cold corpse at the end of the Third Task? Was that a lie too, Professor?"

Umbridge was up against the blackboard, chalk from her lesson plan staining the back of her robes. Harry sneered at her one more time, then backed up, spun round in the back of his trainers like he'd seen Daphne do all his life, and calmly marched out of the classroom. He had a brutal smirk on his face as he did so. Maybe that hadn't been the proper thing to do, especially given what Blaise had been talking about.

But it had felt damned good.

Harry wasn't that surprised when a raven swooped down on his breakfast, dumping a short letter on his almost-empty plate. Nor had he been surprised when he saw whom it was from, although he questioned the necessity of delivering a message by those means when it could have just as easily been delivered by yelling across the room. While that might have drawn more attention than was really needed, it was Snape, after all.

He walked to Snape's office, knowing that he was going to receive a thorough verbal lashing from his Head of House. One that he wasn't entirely sure he didn't deserve.

Harry knocked on the heavy door. The minor impact pushed it open, and Harry took that as a sign to enter. Snape was sitting at his desk, looking down at a stack of papers. "Close the door," he ordered, without looking up. Harry silently complied. He walked toward the desk, and stood in the middle of the room, like a soldier at attention. Snape seemed to take no notice. Minutes passed, and the man continued to grade essays. Finally, he set the last one in the pile aside, and looked up, his face utterly devoid of expression. "I'm almost surprised, Potter, that given how reckless, impatient, and impulsive your behavior has been, that you managed to pass that little test."

"Perhaps a few years ago I might have fallen for it," Harry conceded.

“Perhaps. Or perhaps you expected something like this.”

Harry said nothing.

“Do you know why I asked you here, Potter?”

“I don’t pretend to know your thoughts, Professor.”

“Are you implying that you can’t conceive of a single reason I might have asked for this meeting?”

“Certainly not,” Harry replied swiftly, trying to sound calm. “I have been...indiscrete with regards to a number of matters.”

“That’s one way of putting it.” Snape stared at him. “You never cease to amaze me, Potter. You can diagnose exactly what you have done wrong, but seem utterly incapable of preventing the exact same thing from happening again in the future.”

“With all due respect, Professor...”

“I did not give you permission to speak your mind, Potter, nor will I grant it to you if you were to request it. I am not angry with you, Potter. I have long since ceased to feel that particular emotion with regards to you. No, Potter, I am deeply disappointed, and greatly concerned. If I feel any anger at this moment, it is at the idiocy of whatever higher power decided that it would be amusing to place the survival of free wizarding society in the hands of one as undisciplined and unstable as you. The fates may have a fine sense of humor, Potter, but no one is laughing. The fear of a painful death tends to have a...suppressing effect on mirth.”

Harry stayed silent.

“Potter, I know you quite well. And to be honest I’m astounded that I ever even conceived the notion that you were merely a copy of your father. Your flaws run even deeper, and worse, your responsibilities far exceed those of a Quidditch Captain or Head Boy.”

Snape looked down and opened a drawer on his desk. He pulled out a battered picture frame, and set it down fully in Harry's line of vision. Staring distrustfully back at the young man was his mother, probably around the age of fifteen or sixteen when Snape has no-so-surreptitiously captured her image. Her brilliant red hair shined like a halo, reminding him of a certain someone he'd very recently betrayed.

Harry seethed inside, and tried to calm himself. Now that he knew the full history of Snape and his mother, the bait was all the more tempting. But he restrained himself, staring stubbornly into Snape's eyes, refusing to show even the briefest flash of emotion.

"You see, Potter, that if what I hear is true, it seems that we have yet one more thing in common. We both suffered a moment of insanity, and caused injury to those we cared deeply about. You are many things, Potter, but an abusive boyfriend is not one of them. I am under no illusions as to how Ginny Weasley ended up in the Hospital Wing with a fractured skull. Last I saw her, she had the dignity and pride not to blame her injuries on a tumble down the stairs. Do you know how many young women in her situation might do that? How many might forgive the greatest of sins because they don't want to lose the slender grasp of happiness they possess? She did not implicate you, because that wasn't necessary. Only the feeble-minded and uninformed require such information in those circumstances."

Harry kept staring. "Sir."

Snape looked down briefly at the stack of papers before him. "We are all imperfect, Potter. And many of us feel that we must surround ourselves with friends and allies that complement our strengths and make up for our weaknesses. But in your case, I believe you have made a grave mistake. And unless you correct it soon, you will have thrown away your already slender chances of becoming what you must become. Destiny is a fickle thing, Potter. Normally I question any human being who believes they are intrinsically more important than any other. But throughout history, there have been exceptions. Great rulers and monarchs that have transcended the bounds of human accomplishment."

Harry tried to figure out if Snape was giving him a backhanded compliment. It didn't seem likely.

"But you see, Potter, in order to reach the heights of their power and might, they had to leave those that destiny had not chosen behind. They may have had friends, allies, close and trusted subordinates, but they were alone. As you must be."

"I know that it's up to me," Harry argued.

Snape stared at him coldly. "Do you? Do you really? Can you truthfully tell me that when you let your guard down, you don't secretly hope that others, with greater station and power will lift you upon their shoulders and carry you down the road of your destiny?"

"I...no..." Harry admitted. It was undeniable. He counted on Aiden, on Daphne, on his few allies within the pureblood elite and the government to further his cause, to give him an opportunity to seize the moment and come into his own. But what Snape was asking, in a roundabout and frankly maddening fashion, was one simple question: What if that day never comes? What if you wait in vain for the celestial trumpets to sound, for the moment of your destiny to come to pass?

"True leaders, Potter, make their own opportunities. They may use others to further their own goals and objectives, but they never rely on them. If you rely on another man, and he fails, then his failure has destroyed both of you."

"You are alone, Potter, and it's bloody well time that you faced that fact and did something about it. Granger, brilliant as she is, is not going to be able to help you. Whatever emotional support your girlfriend may have offered only makes you more dependent, weaker. You can't afford weakness, Potter."

"Professor," Harry said, trying to steady his voice. "Thank you."

“Don’t thank me!” Snape roared. “Learn. Listen. For Merlin’s sake, Think! Don’t offer me empty platitudes.”

Harry almost apologized, but realized that would just ignite another outburst.

Snape looked down at the papers again. When he raised his head, it was as if the conversation had never taken place. With his usual disapproving sneer, he said, “Potter. It’s come to my attention that you caused a bit of an...incident in Defense Against the Dark Arts. That kind of behavior is completely unacceptable, and unbecoming of Slytherin House. Don’t let news of anything of the sort reach me again, or you will regret it. Now get out of my sight!”

As Harry left, a part of him recognized that the fact that he’d escaped without even a single detention meant that Snape felt his behavior was justified.

A brighter part of him told his ego to shut up.

Harry braced himself as he opened the scroll of parchment that had arrived that morning with his breakfast. He’d recognized the family seal instantly, and excused himself. Standing alone in a deserted corridor, he began scanning the letter.

Harry,

When I pledged my support to you, I granted far more than my loyalty. Given my position, I put my life, and that of my daughter, in your hands. Many thought me foolish, but I was convinced that in you I had seen the potential for the kind of leader whose tales are told hundreds of years after his death. I still believe you have that potential, Harry. You are strong in mind and soul, as well as in magic. But I cannot help but be disappointed with some of your choices and your overall lack of urgency. This war has already begun, Harry. You should know that, as you were there for the opening shots. It is time to rise up to meet the challenge that destiny has prepared for you.

Perhaps it is unfair that one as young as yourself should be asked to do so much. But this world is not fair, Harry, and it never has been. I

resisted Voldemort in the first war because my conscience told me that it was the proper thing to do. Regardless of my family's orientation, I could not support his cause, or his methods. Perhaps it was arrogant to believe that I could stand up on principal and defy the Dark Lord, rather than commit to him and perhaps work behind the scenes to ensure his eventual defeat. Or, at the very least, remain on the sidelines, a minor player with little impact on the outcome of that struggle, one way or the other. But I was young then, Harry. I had two precious daughters that I cherished more than anything I'd ever loved before. I had a beautiful, strong wife, who could match my intelligence and often defeat me in a game of wits. And for doing the right thing, for resisting the Dark Lord in the hopes that I'd never be forced to send my own child to do such abhorrent things as his followers were called on to do, I suffered greatly. My wife's death, and the death of Daphne's sister are like an open wound that has refused to heal to this day and I shall never cease in my quest for vengeance. It is my greatest dream to see the smear of Voldemort erased from this earth. In you, I see a chance to finally vanquish him, forever, and perhaps return to a time where light and dark, wizard and Muggle, can co-exist separately, but peacefully.

Harry, Daphne is not my only source of information at Hogwarts. I have heard rumors, some truly disturbing, about your behavior and conduct of late. I try to listen to the worst with a dose of healthy skepticism, but also examine the more positive in a pessimistic light. I do not like what I see, Harry. And I am certain that you do not either.

You need not fear losing my loyalty, or my trust. But my confidence is slipping, Harry. I will fight at your side until I draw my last breath. But it need not be said that I would still despair would my death occur in the course of defeat, and not victory.

I have sworn an oath, and I will keep it. But I cannot speak for the others. You must persuade them, not with words or promises, but with deeds. What manner of deeds, you might ask? I'm afraid that it is not my place to tell you what you must do. Part of every hero's journey is conquering his fear and uncertainty, and finding a way to accomplish what must be done. The time has come. The hour is at hand.

In Loyal Comradeship,

Aiden Greengrass

Harry re-read the letter at least three times before all of Aiden's words had finally penetrated his oh-so-thick skull. In a spasm of rage, frustration, and despair, he mashed the parchment into a ball, squeezing it tight with his fingers, letting the harsh edges of the paper cut into his fingers. He felt a burning sensation on his right hand, and stretched it out in front of him, palm up. He'd gotten a rather nasty cut on his middle finger. He stared at his hand, watching blood pool around the wound and then begin to trickle down to his palm, pooling there. He flexed his fingers, as if to remind himself that he still had the ability to exercise control over something, even if it was as unremarkable as the capacity to send nerve pulses from his brain to the small muscles that allowed his hand to grasp the ball of parchment so firmly. Harry stared at the pooling blood for a moment longer, noticing that the trickle was slowing as his platelets clotted the wound, creating a temporary barrier that would buy time for his body to heal itself. He had much in common with those tiny cells, he realized. Rarely did he look for a long-term solution to any problem, unless forced to. Survival was a day-to-day, hour-to-hour, minute-to-minute activity. He mused that if he'd been born a hemophiliac, unable to form blood clots, that small paper cut, birthed by a moment of irrational rage, could have killed him. He would have just kept bleeding out until oxygen no longer flowed through his body, and his heart and lungs failed. What a miserable way to die that would be.

Harry let the bloodstained letter drop silently to the floor, and wiped the blood from his hands onto his black robes. Then, he began walking. He started off at a slow pace, but began to gain speed. He let all of his frustration and anger be channeled into the simple motion of putting one foot before the other. He had no idea where he was going, or when he would get there. It didn't matter.

His little blind stroll ended when his forward motion was abruptly halted by an unexpected collision with another human being, one that sent Harry crashing to the floor and knocked the other against the wall, although Neville managed to keep his feet. "What the bloody hell is wrong with you?" Harry snapped.

Neville looked like he was about to apologize, but unexpectedly gave Harry exactly what he deserved, "Forgive me if I'm wrong," the normally shy Gryffindor said, "but I'm pretty sure that I was just standing here, minding my own business, when you came barreling around the corner like the bloody Hogwarts Express and got knocked on your arse."

Harry stared at him for a moment, and then started laughing. "What so funny?" Neville demanded, getting red in the face. Harry had to fix this before it got truly ugly. Neville was in better shape than he'd been when he first got to Hogwarts, and he'd grown to be both taller and more heavily built than Harry's slender, if muscled, frame. Physically, Harry was at a major disadvantage. Not that he expected this to come to blows, but such thoughts rarely escaped him.

"Nothing, nothing at all," Harry managed as he tried to kill his laughter. He coughed. "Just kind of laughing at the absurdity of it all, you know?"

"What do you mean?" Neville asked suspiciously.

"Nothing...really, it's nothing. Don't mind me. I'm just losing my mind."

"That's something you might want to concern yourself with," Neville pointed out.

"If that were the greatest of my worries right now I'd be a lot better off," Harry replied.

"What's wrong?"

Harry blinked. "Sorry?"

"What's wrong? Obviously something's bothering you...well, I suppose that's true all the time, given who you are and all... But whatever this is seems to be worse than the usual. So out with it?"

“Neville!” Harry exclaimed. “That’s rather...direct of you.”

The Gryffindor shrugged. “It’s not like you’ll tell me anything if you dance around the subject.”

“Well, yes, but...did Hermione put you up to this?”

Neville frowned, looking annoyed. “No. Why would you say that? It is so odd for a friend to ask another friend about what’s troubling him? What’s gotten into you, Harry?”

Oh, I don’t know. I’m being asked to do something impossible, one of Fudge’s lackeys is sitting in Daphne’s chair...and I just found out she’s really quite a terrible person, but not before I sent my girlfriend to hospital wing by throwing a temper tantrum, Snape would probably kill me if he didn’t need me alive, Aiden’s losing hope on me a year after comparing me to Merlin...and bloody hell, you, Neville, are actually being assertive! Forget me, what the bloody hell has gotten into this world?

“I...it’s complicated,” Harry said. “I’m trying to do with a whole bunch of different problems at the same time, and royally fucking it all up in the process. I haven’t managed anything but to make things worse, and I still don’t know how to make things better and I’m running out of time and...” Harry took a deep breath. “I can’t do this, Neville,” he said in a soft voice. “It’s too much. I’m not ready, hell I might never be ready. Fate’s played some sick joke on this world, and I’m the punch-line.”

“Harry...”

“That’s not even the worst of it,” Harry continued, his composure coming undone with every word that spewed from his lips. “The worst part is that I thought I could do it. I thought I was invincible. I thought that, if it was my destiny to lead, that all I needed to do was just survive and wait for the celestial trumpets to see my destiny unfold before me. I thought I was ready to take up responsibility, but I guess it never occurred to me, delusional as I was, that I might actually have to make things happen, rather than let them happen. That fate wasn’t

going to drag me along, kicking and screaming, into some final battle where I kill Voldemort and win this war. And I allowed others to suffer the same delusion. I gave them false hope that I was the answer to all of this, that I could pull the wizarding world together and defeat Voldemort and his armies, because that's what I'm supposed to do. Some have stacked their lives, the lives of their children, Neville, their children, on this misguided hope that I would be their salvation. Their deaths will be on my hands. Assuming anyone even remembers who I was, I'll be some cautionary tale about the folly of believing in your own destiny. All of the pain, all the suffering, all the death that will come when I can't do what I'm supposed to do will be laid on my shoulders."

Harry stared pathetically at Neville, who looked thoughtful. "Well, I daresay that lamenting how awfully you've fouled things up probably isn't going to help. I know that from experience."

"What is there left to do but catalog my mistakes?" Harry asked softly, almost to himself.

"Oh I don't know, how about getting off your bum and trying to do something?" Neville asked, harshly. "You think too much, Harry. You try to consider every side of a problem, and never really find a solution. Well, maybe you need to do something new. Something bold."

"Like what?"

"Why is it my job to tell you that? I mean, shouldn't you be able to figure that out yourself?"

"I suppose so."

"Well, then put that brain of yours to work. Stop yelling at people like Umbridge and feeling sorry for yourself and find a starting point. You've got a long way to go, but you won't do anything productive if you don't take it slowly. It's never too late to try. Grandmum always said that, but I'm not sure I ever understood what she meant until now."

“What can I do, Neville? I’m in no position to do anything? I don’t have any family left, I’m stuck at this school...”

“There you go, whining again! Is that helping anyone?”

“No.”

“ You know, Professor Dressler’s classes made me realize something that really frightens me: none of us stands a chance in battle right now. We can stun animals, hit stationary targets, use little, childish spells, but even the weakest Death Eater could cut us to pieces. But you stood up to Voldemort, and you are still here. Teach us, Harry. Give us a fighting chance. I don’t want to die either.”

“I...Neville, what’s gotten into you?”

“I’m angry,” he replied. “I angry at a lot of things, and you in particular. I don’t know anything about fighting a war, or what you are being asked to do. But I know that you are going to fail if you stay on this path. So do something!”

With that, he stomped away. Harry stared at his back in disbelief.

Around the corner, unseen by all but those who weren’t looking for her, Luna Lovegood smiled.

Harry waited in pleasant anticipation as the first few students started to file into the Room of Requirement. Most looked baffled and confused; others stared in wonderment at the training equipment that they must have thought Harry himself had acquired. These kinds of facilities were normally only available to Aurors. He’d yet to truly explore what this place was capable of, but for now, it served his purposes.

Hermione finally arrived and her eyes immediately found his. Neville followed soon after. Luna and Blaise showed up in mid-conversation,

Blaise looking at her as one might a creature from outer space. A few of the older students he'd invited, including Mary Lochley, also showed up, to his great encouragement. There were a few notable absences. A number of the Ravenclaws he'd asked hadn't come, and few Gryffindors except Ron Weasley and a few of his friends had bothered to show up. The Twins, whom Harry had been desperately avoiding of late, weren't there. There was also one other missing individual, and Harry's heart sank. He'd hoped that...and there she was, flanked by her two best friends in her year. Harry flashed her a shy smile, and she returned it weakly, but never made eye contact.

No matter. There is a time and a place for dealing with such things, and this is neither the proper time nor the proper place.

The crowd of students, once they'd stopped gaping at the furnishings of the Room of Requirement, looked to him with anticipation. "Thank you all for coming. Welcome to one of the more interesting features of this castle. This is the Room of Requirement, and it is capable of just about anything you could want. It takes the form of what the user desires at a given moment. I will have to ask all of you to keep its existence strictly secret. While I suspect that Professor Dumbledore knows it, few others do."

"You are probably wondering why I've called you here. I didn't give much in the way of details, and I'm truly touched that so many of you would simply agree to be here without actually knowing what I was planning to do. Now, it's time to lift that veil."

"The Ministry has diluted our defense curriculum to the point where it is utterly useless in any practical setting. No matter what you may hear, there is real danger out there. I've seen it. I've fought it. And I'm fortunate to still be here, telling you about it. You need to be prepared. Sooner or later, this war will come home. And I want to make damn sure that every one of you is skilled enough that you may be granted a fighting chance. This is not school authorized. If the Ministry were to learn of this they would shut it down. I don't want to make threats. But if you don't like what you are hearing, I highly recommend that you leave at this moment, don't come back, and never speak of this meeting again."

He paused. No one moved.

“Very well then. Welcome to the Defense Association. Let’s get down to business.”

A/N: So, there you go! The end of the last chapter was a real doozy, and I felt there needed to be some redeeming feature to this whole mess. Sometimes you just have to start small, no matter how big the task is that needs accomplishing.

I was actually quite pleased by the way this came out. The interactions seemed fairly natural, and I think this chapter restores a sense of momentum that the story had lost somewhat. And Dolores is there, which is always fun. And while I definitely didn't plan on Neville of all people being the one to tip the balance, it worked, somehow. And Luna might have had something to do with it.

Oh boy, is Snape a bastard in this chappie. And yet while his methods may be deplorable, and you might not always agree with him, he's painfully right most of the time.

My beta brought up the point that Harry's not facing any disciplinary action. I don't really see why that can't be true. Many abusive relationships never become known to the administrations of a school, and as Snape, Ginny didn't say how she was injured. Snape knows the truth because while he's a bastard, he's a smart bastard.

So where to go from here? Honestly, I'm still figuring that out. I have an ending in mind, though my grand plans have a tendency to morph unexpectedly. Unfortunately, I won't be touching this again until after Thanksgiving, when I get home from school. This term has been insane, in terms of schoolwork and other things, and this last week has been very trying. Suffice to say I'm writing this despite the brace on my left wrist. Fortunately, I have amazing friends, and I'm making it through this.

Thanks for bearing with me.

Chris Widger

Chapter 13: Waking Leo

Dusk on Diagon Alley. The crowds had subsided, though there was still more than a few shoppers clogging the narrow artery, surveying a variety of wares and services offered by dozens of different businesses. A few stores always drew larger crowds: Quality Quidditch Supplies, Flourish and Blotts, Dervish and Bangs, but with so few options available, at times it seemed the entire British wizarding world had packed onto this cobblestone street. A silent, graceful figure ducked around a corner and disappeared down a dim alleyway. Daphne Dressler felt at home here. The denizens of Knockturn Alley, for the most part, were the homeless, the disfigured, the dregs of wizarding society. Plenty of less than honorable men and women of good social standing came here, of course, but when they were done they headed back home to their luxurious manors, or at least sizable family homes.

A lot of them were probably fugitives, wanted for one petty crime or another. They stayed here because it was, except in extreme cases, a safe zone. Aurors didn't patrol these streets. They barely even concerned themselves with the inhabitants and their doings unless it represented a major threat to the safety of the magical population. Most of the poor lurkers here never got involved in anything that big. That didn't mean that Rufus Scrimgeour's office remained blind and deaf when it came to Knockturn and its smaller arteries. They had informants, spies, that, in general, did a good job of blending in. Well, besides the three she had already spotted. She was pretty certain she had been introduced to at least two of them. Their disguises, while authentic enough, did not make up for the lack of desperation in their eyes, the lack of urgency that those that did not know where and when their next meal would come. Some, she knew, were former denizens themselves, hired by the Ministry for a menial salary that was enough to support a simple lifestyle, but one with all the essentials, which was more than could have been said in their pasts. They had a better chance of escaping suspicion. But those highly-trained sons of Ministry officials? They had no chance. It was for that reason that their bodies never turned up in the gutter. People noticed when they disappeared.

Daphne was here for several things of questionable legality, though they weren't explicitly forbidden by Ministry Law, they were certainly not things that the Ministry wanted a person to have. She'd been lucky to have escaped detection for this long. She needed better cover, and she needed ways of covering her tracks. Capture was not an option. She couldn't rot in a cell while Harry took on the world.

There were certain people on Knockturn Alley with a talent for making people and objects disappear. They weren't assassins; although there were a few of those, these disappearances were temporary and at the whim of the person who paid for them.

There were a few ways that an Auror could track down a fugitive. The first, and most reliable, was as old as crime itself: the informant, either a random citizen or a paid agent. She'd seen wanted posters. The image presented, while it beat Sirius's from the year before, wasn't flattering. She didn't think she looked overly threatening; then again, that's one of the reason that "cold-blooded" was sometimes used to describe her. There were other ways. Each witch or wizard had a different magical signature. Certain individuals, including a few unofficially employed by the Ministry, could track that signature like a bloodhound. Rarely employed, their existence was a closely guarded secret. Unfortunately for the Ministry, they had not anticipated that one of their most senior Aurors might eventually find herself on the other side of the law. Fugitives could be tracked down if they tried to access their money and did not have a good relationship with the Gringotts goblins (in no small part due to Harry, she did not have such a problem). Accessing Ministry transportation, be it the floo or the Knight Bus, was a great way to get discovered if you didn't have a damned good disguise. Obviously, Aurors could stake out current and former places of residence and the homes of friends or family. Daphne had, so far, stayed well away from those. That wasn't going to be an option for much longer.

The rotten and mildewed sign above the store said simply "Ghent's Place." The storefront was innocent looking enough, for a business on Knockturn. The windows were so dusty that one couldn't see inside. The door was plain brown oak. Daphne entered. She waited. And waited. Ten minutes later, just as she'd expected, a thin, waif of a young girl emerged from a partially hidden door.

“Can I help you?” she asked in a small voice.

“Are you alone here?” Daphne asked, injecting just a bit of genuine concern in her voice. This girl looked worse than the last one. Then again, it had been over a decade since she’d last been here.

“I don’t know. What do you want, mud or gold?”

“It’s the mud I’m most interested in.” A rather bizarrely amateurish code phrase, Daphne thought, but maybe that was the point. There was nothing more reliable in the world than the tendency of a Ministry agent to overthink a simple problem.

“I’m going to have to ask you to remove your cloak. We need to be careful you see.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that,” Daphne said.

“Oh, but I insist,” the girl said.

“I’m afraid I must decline.”

“That’s too bad. I never see any of your faces. Come,” she said, gesturing to the door.

“That easy?” she asked.

“If you say that it’s easy,” the girl replied. “Straight inside.”

As she entered the dimly-lit room, she heard the girl behind her whisper. “Why is she here? She isn’t like the others...”

If only you knew.

The room she entered was only slightly brighter, with most of the light provided by a massive brass chandelier, looking rather out of place in this rathole. A man in shadow was staring at her. She avoided his

gaze at first. He was of average height and in the process of losing most of his rich brown hair. He wore thick, blocky glasses that made his eyes look far larger than they probably were. His attire was plain; worn grey robes with the tattered remains of what might have once been a family crest on the shoulders, workman's boots, and faded leather gloves.

She didn't bother asking his name. He didn't seem to immediately recognize her, although he probably would once he got a closer look at her, which he would need in order to give her what she wanted. "How can I help you?" he asked, his voice betraying a subtle Welsh accent.

"I need not to be seen."

The man smiled. "I know just the thing."

Harry supposed it was the point of detention to be mind numbingly boring, but he sometimes wondered why teachers didn't at least take advantage of the temporary slave labor their delinquent students provided to accomplish something useful. His first year, Hagrid had used him, Hermione, Malfoy, and Neville to more effectively search for a wounded unicorn. While he had gotten more than he bargained for, at least Hagrid had accomplished something. He wasn't sure he could say the same as he dunked his tattered rag into a bucket of soapy water and began scrubbing at the stone floor of the corridor. What the hell was the point of this? It was just going to be filthy tomorrow; it was a castle in Scotland for Merlin's sake. And while he'd seen Filch performing all manner of seemingly pointless tasks before, hand-scrubbing the floors probably wasn't something that Dumbledore demanded of the bitter Squib caretaker.

His back burned but he ignored it. Despite accomplishing very little, due to the fact that Filch was demanding a level of cleanliness that just was not possible even with magic, the man had to let him go in five minutes. Oh, he would grumble about Harry's laziness and probably threaten him with the rusty chains he claimed to keep in his office, and Mrs. Norris would howl at him, but if Harry could be in the least bit frightened by such a pathetic man, Aiden would have given up on him a long time ago.

“This is shameful work, Potter,” came a snarl from behind him. “You get back here and do it right. You’re not going anywhere until I can see my reflection on this floor.”

Harry bit back a retort, something along the lines of how Filch probably wouldn’t want to be staring at his own reflection all day long.

“Are you listening to me?” he demanded, grabbing Harry’s shoulder roughly. More out of instinct than anything else, he jerked away, and the ungainly caretaker stumbled before crashing to the floor. Because this just was not Harry’s night, he managed to take out the basin as he struggled to get up, sending Mrs. Norris scampering away from the onrushing tide of water.

Filch was enraged. Harry rose to his feet and offered his hand. Filch refused it. “I don’t need your help, you insolent whelp!” After more than a little struggle, Filch managed to get off the ground. He proceeded to lay into Harry, and informed him with a nasty grin that he wasn’t going to sleep a wink tonight. A glance at his watch told Harry that his detention was over. Still, reluctant to leave such a mess, he quickly drew his wand and restored the water to the basin. He cast a Cleaning Charm for good measure, and turned to face Filch. The man’s face was purple with anger. “NO MAGIC!” he screamed.

“My detention is over,” Harry replied in a level voice. “I thought you might appreciate it if I cleaned up the mess before I left.”

“You thought so,” Filch growled. “Well, how considerate of you. That your good deed for the day, Potter? Helping out us ordinary folk? That’s what you do, isn’t it?”

“I’m sorry if I offended you,” Harry replied, though he really wasn’t.

A distinctive throat-clearing behind him drew his attention. He literally felt the muscles in his back tense. “Is there a problem here? Are you being difficult, Potter?”

“No, Professor,” Harry replied. “There was a bit of an accident and since my detention was over, I decided to use a charm to clean it up. Mr. Filch feels that I should have done it by hand.”

“Perhaps it would have been good for you, Mr. Potter, to be a little closer to the ground.”

“I assure you, Ma’am, that I’ve had quite enough of that experience for one evening. In any case, I’ve completed my detention, and unless you wish to speak with me, I should be off to bed. It’s after curfew.”

“I know that, Mr. Potter,” she replied prissily. “Mr. Filch? Is there anything you’d like to add?”

Harry expected a tirade, but Filch shook his head. “I took a tumble,” he said. “Nothing more. Get him out of my sight.” He seemed sheepish, embarrassed, even depressed. I suppose that seeing a student perform magic with such ease must be difficult for someone that’s never been able to do anything with a wand. Still, he would have guessed that Filch’s reaction to being embarrassed would have been anger, not this. Maybe he didn’t know him quite as well as he thought. It had to be difficult being a Squib at a magical institution. Harry wondered why he stayed all these years.

“Hem-hem.”

Harry snapped out of his reverie. “Professor?”

“Walk with me, Potter,” she said, turning to go. Harry hesitated. “Are you deaf, Mr. Potter? I told you to walk with me.”

“Professor, I really should be getting back,” he protested lamely. It was worth a try.

“Your detention is not over until I say it is over. Come.”

“Yes Ma’am,” Harry replied, gritting his teeth, straightening his robes, and hurrying to catch up. Filch resumed grumbling in the background, with Mrs. Norris meowing her assent.

They walked down the corridor, and turned a corner. Harry looked at the shorter woman, who was staring straight ahead with an emotionless expression. “Do you know what bothers me the most about my colleagues at the Ministry, Potter?”

“I can’t say I do, Professor.”

“They go about their lives, doing what is expected of them. Or rather, what they feel is expected of them. It never occurs to any of them that their assumptions of expected behavior might be at odds with what others want.”

Harry hadn’t the slightest clue where this was going.

“Take some of the Minister’s other advisors. Their job is to be experts in their fields. The Minister is a brilliant man, Mr. Potter, more than capable of understanding what they are saying and making his own decisions. Yet some of his closest friends insist upon compromising their objectivity by making suggestions as often as they present facts. What is most frustrating is when they present facts in such a manner that leads the Minister to see things the way he does. The problem, Mr. Potter, is that far too often, the man presenting a biased argument is dreadfully ignorant of all manner of pertinent details. That is why each of the Minister’s advisors has a specific field. Their job is not to speculate, to theorize, or to decide what information is relevant and what is not. Their job is to report the facts. Do you understand why this is so frustrating, Mr. Potter?”

“I can see why it would be difficult, Professor.”

“Difficult hardly begins to describe it,” she said, waving her hand dismissively. “The term ‘advisors’ which so many, including myself, just now, use to describe these people is dreadfully misleading. Their job is not to offer advice. Their job is to inform the Minister, so that he may make informed decisions.”

“What if he makes the wrong decision?” Harry asked, unable to resist.

“Decisions that may seem to be errors in your eyes may yet be vindicated. Each choice the Minister makes has not only short-term, but long-term implications, Mr. Potter. The more short-sighted individuals, including yourself, see only the short-term impact and rush to declare judgment. They fail to understand the entire picture. And then they spread these erroneous judgments to others, biasing their perception of the matter until the Minister can no longer take off his hat without being suspected of duplicity. That is far more damaging than any action that could be labeled treason.”

“Are you saying that my comments in class the other day make me a traitor, Professor?” Harry asked.

“Treason requires intent, else it would merely be gross irresponsibility. You may think you understand everything, that by being the Boy-Who-Lived, the world is your birthright, but let me make one thing abundantly clear, Mr. Potter. You are powerless, and that is because you do not deserve power. Once, we looked without hesitation to the oldest among us for guidance, because they had seen more, experienced more, failed and succeeded more, and learned invaluable lessons in the process. This is why it is proper to respect one’s elders, Mr. Potter. Because even if what they are doing may seem terribly foolish, it is most likely you that are the fool.”

Harry didn’t reply.

“Because I don’t believe anyone has ever put this matter in such clear terms, I will assume it was ignorance that has driven you to rebellious action, and thus I will forgive this transgression. In the future, I will not be so lenient. Scrubbing floors is monotonous and filthy work, but do not make the mistake of assuming I cannot find more unpleasant uses for you. I’m quite imaginative.”

Harry couldn’t resist this time. “All legal, I’m sure. As a Ministry official and professor here, it is your duty to set an example for us. That’s

why you were assigned here. You want to show us what a real Defense class should be like, taught by a proper teacher, rather than a traitor, a narcissist, a werewolf, a madman, and a murderer.”

“Is that contempt I hear in your voice, Mr. Potter?” Umbridge asked, the level of her voice rising. “Your polite words mean nothing if the tone in which they are delivered smacks of arrogance and conceit.”

“I assure you, I meant to imply no such thing, Professor,” Harry said calmly. “I was merely speculating as to what you want to accomplish.”

“And, surprisingly enough, you are quite close. But one thing you missed is that I want to end this absurd freedom from the law that this school has enjoyed and abused. This is a magical institution, funded in part by taxpayer galleons. It cannot be allowed to operate without guidance and oversight from the elected government of our magical society.”

“The Headmaster will fight you,” Harry told her.

“He will lose,” Umbridge replied confidently. “Dumbledore is an old man, afflicted by delusions of grandeur and an arrogance born of his popularity. He is responsible for the disorder that has occurred here because of his hiring choices. I was astounded he was allowed to remain as Headmaster of this institution after the events of three years ago.”

“Events over which he had little control.”

“You would know that, wouldn’t you, Mr. Potter? I daresay I’m nearly as surprised that you are still here.”

“Well, as you said earlier, I’m young, and I was even younger then. Mistakes are forgiven when they are made by those that don’t know any better.”

“Indeed. You should be quite grateful that I took that view when it was brought to my attention. I am the Minister’s senior education advisor.”

Harry doubted such a position actually existed.

“McGonagall will have to go as well, I fear, though she’ll be much more difficult to push out. She’s a tough old bird, sly as a fox, and cold as ice. Snape too, of course. It’s a disgrace to our justice system that such a man teaches our children.”

“Do you expect to win so easily?” Harry asked, incredulous at the woman’s ramblings.

“I never said it would be easy, Potter,” she replied haughtily. “But I am confident, that with the Ministry’s backing, I can accomplish what I seek. Dumbledore is not part of the future of this new Hogwarts. He’ll be gently pushed aside for someone more suitable. Someone not already under his spell. Someone who has the right priorities and is willing to work with the elected government, rather than passively resist it.”

She was describing herself, Harry had no doubt, but he didn’t say it. This fascinating and disturbing lecture was making him all the more convinced that Fudge had to go, and fast. Maybe faster than he’d anticipated. If Fudge succeeded in clamping down on control of the Ministry, Hogwarts, and anywhere else he had even partial control, removing him from power would be almost impossible. He might even move on the Dark families, which would destroy any chance of bringing both powerful factions together.

“Why are you telling me all of this?”

“What harm can it do? Dumbledore knows, or at the very least, suspects. He can do nothing. You can’t kill me, and I won’t leave unless the Minister gives me orders. What I’m trying to tell you, Potter, is that you are fighting against a tide you cannot overcome.”

“You make it sound as if I intend to lead a revolt.”

“Perhaps. You see, Mr. Potter, I’ve heard rumors...just rumors, and you know how unreliable those can be...that there is an unauthorized

organization teaching students forbidden defensive magic. Such a thing is not just against school rules, but illegal. Even treasonous. For people might begin to ask, Mr. Potter, why has a student taken such rash action? What could he or she possibly be afraid of? And so rumors beget rumors, and the whole hierarchy upon which order depends comes crashing down.”

“Well, I’m sorry Professor, but I don’t know about anything like that. I can’t say I’d stay away from it if I did, but it saddens me to say that I haven’t heard these rumors. As far as I know, everyone is docilely accepting your new way of teaching defensive theory over practical defensive magic.”

Umbridge didn’t even seem to notice his mocking tone. “I wasn’t accusing you of anything, Mr. Potter. I’d never do such a thing without evidence, and rumors are not evidence. But, suffice to say, if you do learn of who is organizing this, you might be decent enough to let them know that if I was to catch them, the consequences would be very dire. I do not enjoy inflicting physical pain, Mr. Potter. But at times it is a most useful tool in encouraging good behavior.”

Harry stared back at her, keeping his expression blank. “I will keep that in mind, Professor.”

“Do that, Harry.”

They’d arrived at her office. “And this is where we part ways, Mr. Potter. If you should run into someone, let them know to direct any inquiries to me. If I was to learn that you were anywhere you did not need to be to get to your dormitory, I will not protect you, of course, but otherwise, you haven’t anything to fear.”

“Thank you. Goodnight, Professor.”

“Goodnight, Mr. Potter.” She smiled poisonously. “Oh, Mr. Potter, you have done the reading for tomorrow’s class, haven’t you? It’s a rather essential bit.”

“I’m afraid I haven’t found the time,” Harry answered semi-honestly. He’d been too busy committing treason in the Room of Requirement.

“Oh? Well, I suggest that you take the time. You are leading the class discussion tomorrow. Specifically, I want you to explain why understanding theories of defense actually make wizards more confident and at ease during stressful times, rather than teaching curses, which contributes to greater stress and the increased chance of accidents. Rosemary Harris has a bit to say on the subject; you’ll find the except of her article quite enlightening.”

Harry bit back a curse. She was a clever bitch; there was little doubt of that. “I’m sure I will.”

“Your past work in Defense has been spoken of in glowing terms,” she said softly. “I do hope that you live up to the hype.”

“I’ll do my best, Professor.”

“Good. Now be off, Mr. Potter.”

She opened the door to her office and slipped inside. Harry remained there, standing in front of the door, seething, before he finally began the long, torturous journey back to the dungeons.

Dolores Umbridge had won this round. Emphatically.

Christmas was fast approaching, indeed, Harry didn’t even realized that there was less than a week left until he saw the sign-up list posted in the Slytherin Common Room for those staying during winter break. It was also at that moment that in the confusion of the last few weeks, he had not even considered the fact that he would need a place to stay, with Daphne obviously not available to take him in. He had considered his options. He could certainly stay here, though he’d most likely be alone, and he was not sure he liked the idea of that right now. Hermione was badly missing her parents, and there was no chance that she would be around. Ginny...well, she had little reason not to go home. Blaise always spent the holidays in Italy with his family. Neville and Luna were also likely to be gone.

Other possibilities included staying with Sirius at Grimmauld Place, though that didn't sound that appealing, especially at this point in time. Fortunately, the decision was made for him. Well, a number of decisions were made for him, by a clumsy, mischievous witch who made it quite impossible to say "no."

Harry had a bad taste in his mouth when Umbridge finally let them out of class. She'd humiliated him by forcing him to stand before the class and lead the discussion on the readings he so loathed. In the greater scheme of things, her victory was minor at best, and unless Harry allowed it to bother him, her gains were nothing permanent. She was still frightened of him, and seemed quite aware that if he wanted to, he could squash her like a bug. But she also knew that his actions were constrained by propriety.

Despite this, his day had been brightened slightly when Daphne Greengrass had relayed her father's invitation to this year's Karachun ceremony, indicating that while Aiden's faith in him might be slipping, he was still a close friend of the family. At least, that's the way that Harry interpreted it. He needed to ask Blaise, to see if his family was coming again. He had gotten the impression during last year's ceremony that the presence of the Zabinis wasn't a common occurrence.

Harry made a point to be first out of the door, unable to stand the presence of the loathsome woman who had usurped his guardian. That played right into the hands of his abductor, who had Silenced and Petrified him before he could blink. Understandably concerned, Hermione rushed to his aid, then saw the villain, stopped, smiled, and continued on her way. Harry leaned against the wall, getting steadily more irritated, as each of his classmates passed by, curiously staring at the boy-who-was-propped-against-the-wall-like-a-piece-of-plywood. Draco Malfoy stopped dead, staring at the familiar figure responsible for this situation, and stormed away in a huff of disgust, unable to stand the sight of her.

"Wotcher, Harry."

He used his eyes, the only part of his body that still functioned properly, to indicate his intense displeasure. Tonks frowned. "Hmmm...maybe I went a bit far with this. Oh well." She waved her wand, and Harry could move his limbs, even if he still couldn't speak. He gestured onwards. "Good boy," Tonk said, mussing his hair as if he was a large dog. Harry dutifully followed her through the corridors, trying to look at dignified as possible.

Eventually, they reached the main entrance to the castle, and Harry felt the Silencing spell being lifted, though he didn't immediately take advantage of this fact. It was a chilly December afternoon, and Harry wrapped his cloak tighter around his body. He followed Tonks around the castle, until they reached a small alcove, which provided at least some shelter from the winds. Harry decided to play along with the entire spectacle. "How have you been, Tonks?"

"I'd been feeling rather under the weather, but it's cleared up recently. Mum's finally been sent home, though she's under house arrest. Her spirits are quite high, really. She has a lot of faith in Amelia."

"I'm sure," Harry replied. "Any news on that front?"

"Well, this is all unofficial, of course, but Fudge is running out of time to hold her without charge. The regulations on this are surprisingly vague...doesn't seem like there's a lot of history of treason in the upper levels of the Ministry."

"I suspect that there is, but it was often dealt with at the discretion of the Minister," Harry replied.

Tonks shrugged. "Probably true. Live by the law, die by the law, eh?"

"Something like that. Does this mean Amelia will be released soon?"

"Well, she can be held under House Arrest, without an official investigation, for 'suspicion of undermining the Ministry.' So I expect that is what is going to happen. Fudge lacks evidence, because Drake refused to testify."

“He can do that? Fudge can’t compel him to give up the rest?”

“Well, what could him do? Fudge wouldn’t know about this entire thing without Drake. He owes him big. Other than the fact that Fudge announced there was an thwarted coup, he’s been keeping all the proceedings rather hush-hush. The press has been completely excluded, to the point where the Prophet’s just given up.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

“Well, of course there was probably some money changing hands or favors called in, but the fact is that the Prophet’s been silent on the issue for weeks.”

Harry considered that. “I suppose it’s hard to gauge, but do you have any idea how Fudge’s supposed allies are reacting? Are they nervous? Protective? Unconcerned?”

“Well, you know how these things go,” Tonks replied. “Some declared their support for the current government. Most didn’t say anything...and that’s enough of politics. I didn’t kidnap you for that.”

“So why are you here?”

Tonks looked hurt. “Come on, Harry. It’s not like nothing’s happened to you in the past few months or anything...” Her sarcasm was somewhat lacking in energy. “I’m worried about you, kid.”

“I’m fine,” Harry snapped.

“Of course you aren’t. But you’d never admit that at a time like this, right? You need to be strong? Can’t show weakness, can’t act like a bloody human being? Might cost you some respect.”

Harry sighed. “Tonks, you didn’t have to come all the way out here and go through all this trouble to ask me if I was alright. You know the answer. How could I possibly be ‘alright?’”

Tonks stared intensely at him for a moment and then enveloped him in a crushing embrace. Harry gave in, appreciating the closeness.

“You’re so stupid. Such a big, bloody idiot you are,” Tonks murmured into his ear. “You think you have to handle it all on your own, and you can’t slow down, can’t stop until you are all done.” Harry felt a wetness on his face, and realized that Tonks was crying. Harry hugged her closer, uncertain of what else to do. To his surprise, she broke away from him. “No,” she gasped. “No. I’m going to just blubber all over you and let you get away this easily.”

“Tonks...”

“You aren’t listening to me. You aren’t acting like a human being...Harry, you’re a kid! Your mum’s been charged with murder and torture and is being hunted like an animal! You’re lucky you haven’t been arrested. Am here I am, crying like this...” She broke down, covering her face with the sleeve of her robes. “I guess I’m only human after all,” she mumbled.

“Tonks, listen to me,” Harry said softly. “I am scared. I’m bloody terrified most of the time. Maybe I’ve gotten better at hiding it, but you can be sure I don’t feel comfortable in this spot. As for Daphne...” Harry broke off, not even sure where to begin. “I suppose I’m angry. Angry that she was so damned foolish. Angry that I was so deluded into thinking she was fine. I’ve been hearing for years that she was dangerously close to the edge, and I ignored every single warning. And when the person I trust the most after her finally finds the courage to tell me that I’m being a complete fool, I nearly kill her...can you even imagine what that feels like?” He could feel hot tears rolling down his own cheeks now, and his voice grew weaker as he ranted.

Tonks shook her head hopelessly.

“You are right about one thing, though. I can’t slow down. I can’t stop. I just don’t have that luxury. People are counting on me. Some are putting their lives, and the lives of their families in my hands, probably because they’ve all gone completely nutters and think I’m

worth a damn. And I'm going to do every fucking thing in my power to make sure I don't let them down!"

Harry threw his hands down in frustration. "I haven't the slightest clue what I'm doing, or what I should be doing, or what I could be doing. But I know one thing, and that is that I'm going to see this through. It might kill me. It probably will. But I suppose I'll cross that bridge when I come to it."

Tonks looked like she was barely listening. Harry took her hands in his. "You've got to trust me, Tonks. You've got to help me. I can't do this without you, and if I don't then I honestly believe we are all going to die. That might still happen. But if I can save one life of a person that believes in me then it is all worth it."

Tonks nodded slowly, then shook her head. "Can't believe I'm hearing this from you, Harry. You've gone and all grown up."

Despite his emotions, Harry smirked. "I suppose I have at that. For what it's worth."

Tonks snorted through her tears. "Oh, if there is one thing I've learned, it's that being a grown-up doesn't mean a damn. There's no magic switch that goes on when you reach a certain point. We're all just kids. Some have just seen more and had to do more than others."

Her face fell again. "Harry, is there anything I can do? Anything to make this all easier?"

Harry sighed. "The Order doesn't believe in me, Tonks. They think I'm an out-of-control menace flirting with the Dark and possessed of spectacular delusions of grandeur. No matter what Dumbledore says. Moody thinks I'm a fool. Sirius still can't wrap his head around the fact that I'm not just another Marauder. Remus, for all his professions of allegiance, is convinced that he's going to die fighting a losing battle. I don't want to know what the Weasleys think of me. Vance seems to have expected a young Dumbledore, and that isn't what she's gotten. Even Kingsley thinks I've lost it."

Tonks frowned at that. "Hey, Kingsley said some really nice things about you this summer."

Harry shook his head. "Tonks, he said I was powerful, and a great duelist...I can see it in his eyes. There's this sadness, this regret that he can't dissuade me out of the path I've chosen. They all think I'm going to fail."

"If that's the case, then they do a great job of hiding it at meetings. I'm not hearing any prophecies of doom and gloom."

Harry laughed bitterly. "They still believe in Dumbledore. They still think that once I get what's coming to me, their old hero will save the day one more time."

"What's so funny about that?" Tonks demanded.

Harry shook his head with amazement. "Dumbledore is the only one who really does believe in me. I suppose that he doesn't have much of a choice in the matter, really. The others are wrong, Tonks. This isn't Dumbledore's war. Truth be told, neither was the last one. The war didn't turn until that one night, when one stubborn witch wouldn't get out of the way, wouldn't yield as she stared down death. Lily Evans Potter won that war, Tonks. And she's gone now."

Tonks looked like she'd been smacked with a hammer. "Never thought of it like that before..." she murmured.

Harry nodded slowly. "Believe me, it isn't just you. Tonks, I can't do all of this on my own. I don't know how to do it, what you should do. But you've got to make them believe I'm more than just a martyr-in-training. Because you and I both know that, whatever happens, that isn't the case."

Tonks nodded. "Okay. Okay. I'll do that for you, Harry. I don't know what I'll do, but I'll do it...somehow."

Harry moved towards her and captured her in a crushing embrace. Tonks enthusiastically returned it. "I won't let you down, Tonks. I promise. I'd die before I..." he broke off.

"I know that, Harry. And that's why I'm scared to death for you, and for all of us."

Snow began to fall on Hogwarts.

The ride back on the Hogwarts Express had been awkward, to say the least. Harry and Hermione sat in silence while Neville tried and failed to strike up conversation with both of them in turn. Hermione's shock at Harry's actions had gradually turned to a growing discomfort with even being around him. The absence of Ginny, who'd become a fixture in both of their lives, served as a constant reminder of what had happened between them. Harry had seen very little of the redhead, save for her regular appearances at D.A. meetings. Neither one had so much as spoken a word to the other. He hadn't visited her in Hospital Wing, though he'd been badly tempted, and even gotten out of the Slytherin dormitory before he changed his mind. The reality was that there was nothing to say. Even if Harry was to try and refute Ginny's assertions, some of which he found unfair, he couldn't prove anything.

If he'd learned one thing from this whole mess, it was that he was a far more irrational person than he'd arrogantly assumed. To an extent, perhaps, he'd even seen himself as more than human, unusually mature for his age, and clear-eyed about his world. That delusion had been shattered. He wouldn't make that mistake again.

He knew what Ginny wanted. He did not know if it's manifestation would be enough to heal the gaping divide between them. He needed to re-examine all of his old assumptions, allow himself to think critically about Daphne, and somehow get his emotions out of the way of doing what was right. As if it was that easy, Harry mused, as he watched the English countryside flash by. The reason Daphne had been able to so deceive him, the reason he'd remained so unquestioningly loyal to her, was that she was, for all intents and purposes, his mother. She'd raised him, taught him much of what he knew about the world (some of which was now suspect), given him

love, care, and a steady hand when he needed it most. Yes, he knew that it had been a mutually beneficial relationship; that didn't mean Daphne's supreme act of generosity and love for his real mother, Lily, was in any sense insincere.

They had had a relationship that could best be described as "complicated." So many things had happened, so many things had been said, been done, been not done, that Harry could not blame anyone in the slightest if they simply could not understand what kept guardian and ward from killing each other. They had both made mistakes. Some were bigger than others. Some had permanent consequences; some had already faded from memory.

By doing what he had done to Ginny, by losing his discipline, his temper, and his self-control all at once, he had shown that he could not be trusted. He had shown that he had not learned a number of things that people had been trying to teach him for years. This had not just been an accident. There had been an intent, unconscious, yes, but an intent to hurt Ginny. The thought revolted him, but the truth was inescapable. He could have stopped himself. But at that critical moment in time, he'd suspended his concern for his former girlfriend's well-being.

Such thoughts tormented him day and night as the Christmas holiday wore on. Disinclined to discuss the subject at all, he spent little time beyond the confines of his room. He did have plenty of reading material. What seemed to be nothing more than a Seasons Greetings card from the goblins at Gringotts served as a reminder that there was yet another thing he'd been neglecting. As ordinary as the post had appeared, Harry knew for a fact that Gringotts didn't send out such post except for very special circumstances. He'd gotten another letter, which lay unopened on his desk. It was from Hermione. He'd gotten nothing from Ginny. Or Daphne, but given the situation, he expected that. He could only hope his guardian might find a warm place to hide on Christmas Day.

12 Grimmauld Place slept. Since it was Order Headquarters, there was a possibility of unexpected guests, at either the front door or the fireplace. Well, that was simply a risk he'd have to take. He had considered bringing his invisibility cloak, but deemed it unnecessary.

Beyond that, if one of the other participants he did not know discovered he had one, it would arouse suspicion and distrust. He did not need that. It was hard enough for a lot of Dark wizards to accept that Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived, observed Karachun, when he appeared inarguably honest.

Floo travel was not without its risks, especially in this situation. Still, it was the most convenient of those options available to him, given that a portkey would be difficult to manage, and he still hadn't learned how to apparate. The shortcomings of his chosen method of travel became evident after he thanked Aiden and wished him well, before stepping in to a fireplace in Cornwall and stumbling out of a fireplace in London.

Harry thought initially, based on the silence he encountered on the other end, that he'd managed to attend Karachun without any unwanted attention. He hadn't.

"Good morning, Harry," Remus Lupin said quietly.

Harry was only surprised by who had managed to catch him. Remus didn't spend that much time around 12 Grimmauld Place. He was often out on Order business, or at least, that's what Harry assumed. Whatever it was seemed to be exhausting; even when Harry saw him weeks after his transformation; he looked worse than he could remember seeing the man. His appearance now wasn't any different. The dark bags under his eyes probably stood out the most, but Remus seemed to have aged 20 years since the first time Harry had met him, less than two years ago. "Good morning, Remus. Nice night, isn't it?"

Remus shrugged. "I haven't been outside. Why would you ask me when you know the answer yourself...well, at least you are familiar with the current weather patterns around Cornwall."

Harry smiled despite himself. "So you expected this."

"Of course I did," Remus said. "You did manage to get out without me noticing, so I decided that since I wasn't going to be sleeping

anyway, I might as well get a chance to see you and find out all about it.”

Harry, set at ease by the older man’s carefree attitude, sat down in a facing chair. “So are you going to ask?”

“Well, I was going to get there eventually. So, how was the dark and mysterious rite of Karachun?”

“Less eventful than last time, I’d say. Aiden swears that he’s never felt so many emotions at the same time since his first Karachun. Some years are quite exciting, but I daresay he’s sometimes disappointed.”

“You’re almost making it sound like nothing unexpected happened.”

Harry smiled. “Oh, don’t be foolish Remus.”

Remus shook his head. “For a moment, I thought your life might have become boring.”

Harry sighed, trying to summon the words. “It wasn’t like last time...you’ve got to understand, Karachun is a unique experience each time for each person. Last time I had a real vision. I really don’t know if it was really the dead reaching out to speak with the living, or if it was some kind of magic masquerading as something else, but it was real, Remus. I saw...someone. Someone important, that I’d never seen before in my life outside of photographs.”

Remus looked pensive. “I won’t ask who it was. I’ve heard a bit about Karachun. Stories, mostly, some from more reliable sources than others. It’s quite an experience, from what I hear. Sounds quite frightful, really. The dead speaking in the midst of all of the light and fire.”

“I suppose it could be,” Harry admitted. “In any case, I didn’t have that kind of experience this time. No one came out to meet me. But I...I just can’t describe it.”

“You don’t need to, Harry. If it meant something to you, that’s really all that matters. Some things we don’t need to share. Others we don’t want to share. In any case, don’t trouble yourself. I’m most glad to see you back here, safe and sound. The world is becoming more dangerous, Harry, in ways that none of us can see. But it’s happening.”

Harry couldn’t restrain his curiosity. “Is this why I’ve seen so little of you? What have you been doing, Remus? What’s Dumbledore been sending you off for weeks for?”

Remus’s eyes darkened. “Harry, as I’m sure you know, one of the major advantages that Voldemort had during the last war was the nearly uncontested loyalty of several non-human races. The Goblins managed to stay out of it, but were definitely leaning in his direction, because the Ministry continued to take them for granted. Obviously, he had the Dementors. He had the giants, though they proved remarkably uninterested in assisting him, which probably saved thousands of lives. His operations never did significantly extend beyond the British Isles, so even though I expect they would have sided with him, the Vampires didn’t come into play for the most part. The Trolls were all too willing to do what he asked; they love nothing more than killing. And so were the Werewolves.”

“And that is what you are trying to do? Pull them away from Voldemort?”

To his surprise, Remus let out a dark chuckle. “If only it were that easy. I don’t know how much you know about us, Harry. Britain probably has a population numbering in the hundreds. I’ve heard there are a lot more up in Scotland. But of greatest concern, naturally, are the urban packs. Surviving on your own as a werewolf isn’t easy, Harry. And because it is so hard to hold down a job, inevitably werewolves migrate to the cities. There are a number of big groups in London, a few scattered in some other cities: Bristol, York, Manchester, to name a few.”

“So there is some organization?”

“Yes and no. Some packs have an alpha, and work cooperatively, keeping everyone fed and healthy, cooperating so that they don’t raise a high profile. It’s somewhat remarkable, really, what happens when you have a group with so much to lose and no one to turn to but their own kind.”

“Transformations must be interesting, with that many packed together.”

“They scatter. They’ll go to the countryside, places where they aren’t likely to be found. Inevitably, there are incidents. The ministry has, to their credit, set up some areas hidden to Muggles for no announced purpose.”

“Remus, I’ve always wondered,” Harry said, with a bit of trepidation. He wondered if he was treading on sensitive grounds, “I haven’t done that much reading on werewolves beyond what Snape assigned us, though I keep meaning to do more. In any case, are werewolves only different from humans one day a month?”

Remus shrugged. “That depends greatly. I think it is established that we heal very quickly, and can manage some serious feats of strength if we’re riled up enough. Physiologically though, most of the time that’s the case.”

“Most of the time?”

“Harry, some werewolves have the ability to retain their form for days after a full moon. It’s not common, and it takes a tremendous amount of mental discipline, as well as some innate talent. I’ve heard that the more time one spends in wolf form, the more melded the minds and wills of wolf and man become. I suppose it makes a certain degree of sense.”

“Are you..?”

Remus shot him a fierce look. “I’ve never tried, Harry. I may well be as talented as anyone, but I’ve never had any desire to prolong my time and agony one second longer than necessary. I am not proud of

what I am. I hate what I am. But what I am cannot be changed, so I endure until the morning. Wolfsbane makes it easier. I'm fortunate to have access to it."

"I'm sorry, Remus," Harry said. "I didn't mean to upset you."

"I know you didn't," the older man replied with a long sigh. "But you need to understand how disgusted I am with all of this. Some might call me a traitor for that, but as far as I'm concerned, I will not truly become one of them until I am no longer terrified by the prospect of my transformation. And I will not allow that to happen."

"Why does Dumbledore keep sending you out there? Haven't you told him how you feel?"

"Not as such, but in any case, I think he knows. Harry, I'm the one who wanted something useful to do. And after I spent some time doing it, and I saw just how great a challenge there was, I couldn't refuse another assignment."

"Haven't they realized that Voldemort doesn't care any more about their rights than the Ministry does? How can they throw their support behind a man who calls for blood purity amongst wizards?"

Harry frowned as Remus didn't respond. "They aren't supporting Voldemort, are they?"

"No." Remus sighed. "Harry, things are more complicated than you understand. Werewolves have never trusted wizards, and they've never had any good reason to believe in the Ministry's promises of supposedly humane legislation. So they look elsewhere for leadership to the...alphas, for a lack of a better word. Two in particular. Neither of them are good news for anyone. "Greybeard" Kilpatrick has especially emerged of late. He's allegedly responsible for several fatal attacks on Muggles, and has gained an alarmingly large following. He's based in the slums of London's East End. He has competition, though. Mostly from 'Stalwart' Blackstone, who's set himself up in a rural area about 60 miles from the capital. He's not as much of a worry – his people most try to stay out of the way of the

Ministry. Kilpatrick lost his family to some overzealous Aurors. Blackstone is an orphan, as far as I know. Both turned very young.”

“That adds a new wrinkle in things, I’ll admit. But what’s the ultimate importance of this, Remus? How big a threat are they if they don’t join with Voldemort?”

“Harry, think about it. While neither of them are going to try anything on the scale of what You-Know-Who’s got planned, turning a small village, a town...that’s not out of the question. If order breaks down, what’s to stop them?”

“ I don’t understand. Remus, if I’m a Muggle and I’m bitten, assuming I even know something strange is happening, I’m not going to throw my lot in with the people that bit me. I’d probably resent them a great deal.”

“Harry, both of the alphas I told you about didn’t make their way to the top without very good reason. They are amazingly persuasive. They could convince the newly converted that they’ve been made better, and that they deserve more than has been given to them. When people are scared, they’ll believe anything. It’s not like they can go to the police or anything like that.”

“But how would they know anything has changed?”

“That’s the really terrifying part,” Remus said, shaking his head. “The development of Wolfsbane wasn’t an isolated event. There’s an institute of sorts, somewhere in Scandinavia, that’s rumored to have discovered the formula for Wolfsbane. There has been all kinds of experimentation on werewolves, only some of them willing subjects, a lot of it covertly funded by our own people, mostly outside of England. It’s all quite secretive, and highly illegal. The general trend has been achieving better control over lycanthropy, reducing the unpredictability of the condition and reducing the power of the subconscious wolf.”

Realization dawned on Harry. “They haven’t just been working on mental control after transformation, have they?”

“Can you imagine, Harry? A werewolf that could transform at will? What’s even worse is that the drug binds with the subjects DNA, altering its genetic. There’s reason to believe that it might make that particular strand of lycanthropy genetic. Transmittable. Even inherited.”

“An entire sub-species of werewolves that could transform at will...”

“Precisely, Harry. I have no idea how close that is to a reality. These sorts of things are very shadowy, almost cloak-and-dagger. The Ministry was more than happy just four months ago to expedite the production and import of Wolfsbane, because it gave them a chance to look compassionate toward werewolves and tighten their control over the population.”

“I heard about that. It was buried in the Prophet.”

“While it’s not something the Ministry really wants the general public to know, it’s still something that is quite a boon to their reputation in certain circles. All in all, it was quite a coup for Fudge. There are some pressure groups, albeit quite small in number and membership, dedicated to improving the lot of magical creatures. They can end a lot of arguments when they dangle this in front of those people.”

“How can I have heard nothing about any of this?”

“Just over a year ago, I didn’t know about it either. It’s terrifying, Harry, what happens when you willingly exclude yourself from a certain community. It’s been a very difficult time, but I think you can see why its necessary.”

“Remus, what if Voldemort gets to the new potions first?”

“You’re starting to understand. No, the werewolves don’t have any good reason to follow Voldemort...yet. But with these developments changing the world that werewolves have existed in for millennia, there might be soon.”

Remus looked off toward the fire. "It's getting dangerous out there, Harry. Don't get burned."

It seemed that neither Umbridge nor Tonks had been exaggerating. As the students settled down to the post-vacation Welcoming Feast, it became apparent to anyone with a brain that the Ministry was in the process of staging a full-scale takeover of Hogwarts. Dumbledore appeared to be going along with it, but as Umbridge read her list of decrees and explained the powers invested in her by her new position, his eyes betrayed a cold rage. McGonagall wasn't so subtle. Snape looked disgusted. Even Flitwick, so perpetually cheerful, looked dismayed. Professor Sprout looked downright mutinous, as if she was planning to invite the DADA professor on a tour of the more dangerous plants in the greenhouses and then lock the door.

No student organizations without explicit written permission from Umbridge. The formation of a glorified goon squad to enforce her will. Temporary suspension of Hogsmeade visits. Appointment of Robert Terrace, a Fudge crony, to the post of "Head of Student Discipline." Regulation of floo powder and surveillance of the fireplaces to avert dissident activity. Suspension of Rubeus Hagrid for failure to cooperate with a Ministry investigation. Staff examination of "suspicious" post. Threat of expulsion if caught out of bounds after curfew. The explanations were as pathetic as Umbridge's attempts to dress up the travesty as being in the best interest of the students.

Harry recalled Aiden's words. "We must act now, or we will never get another chance. Do whatever you can, promise whatever you have to. I will do what I can, but this is your moment, Harry. You alone can bridge the divide between Light and Dark. We can be united. But you need to make the right people listen."

Harry met Umbridge's eyes as he left. You just made the biggest mistake of your life, Professor.

This isn't going to be easy, Harry told himself as he waited down the hallway from the Office of the Professor of Defense Against the Dark Arts. But, after careful consideration of his options, this was probably his best chance of getting out of Hogwarts without anyone noticing or learning it after the fact. Getting into Umbridge's office and using the

fireplace meant getting her well away from that office for a significant period of time. And that meant a serious distraction. Fortunately, Harry knew a couple of young wizards who excelled at creating serious distractions.

Indeed, he'd decided this was the best approach because, in the mind of a person entrusted with keeping Harry safely inside the castle ground, this option had to be the most unlikely, with the least chance of success of any available to the Boy-Who-Lived. Including finding the tiny cracks in the wards where apparition was possible. Dobby had also been an option, but he was sure to be missed. His outstanding work had led to his appointment as a supervisor of sorts. While the enthusiastic elf had whole-heartedly volunteered to carry messages if it was necessary, he couldn't afford to be gone long enough to get Harry into the inner recesses of the Ministry and out with enough time to convince Rufus Scrimgeour to do what he needed him to do. The possibility that the Head of the Auror Office would turn Harry away certainly existed, but Harry thought his odds of success were better than any of his other options, whatever they were.

A series of enormous bangs echoed down the corridor, signaling the start of the Weasley twins' distraction. Harry hadn't been able to get them to admit exactly what they were planning; then again, he hadn't tried terribly hard. He would only get to see the aftermath, in any case.

Harry found the niche containing the painting of a wizard trying and badly failing to ride a horse, and ducked out of sight. In one smooth motion, he pulled the invisibility cloak out of his robes, flung it over his head, and vanished from sight. Just in time, too, as Umbridge came roaring past him seconds later, followed by a pair of her thugs from the Inquisitorial Squad, to his disgust, both members of his own house. Harry waited for one minute, until Umbridge was long gone. He moved down the deserted corridor, still under the cloak, and reached the door. It was closed, but a cursory examination showed that it was unlocked. No sense in using magic if it wasn't absolutely necessary.

He'd already been in Umbridge's office, and thus already been exposed to her horrific predilection for pink, fluffy things, for the

occasion of what was quite possibly the most insincere apology in human history. In any case, his acting had been good enough that Madam Inquisitor hadn't made it an issue since. He'd also stopped going to Defense classes, but so far, hadn't heard anything on that front either. He supposed that Dolores was perfectly content to let him be absent while she spewed her propaganda without anyone willing to publicly contradict her.

He'd brought his own floo dust, and Dolores had been considerate enough to keep the fire going while she meted out justice. He unscrewed the cap of the small vial he'd brought, scattering the powder amidst the flames. He was rewarded by the striking transformation of the color of the fire to a pure emerald green. Hoping that he might be able to land gracefully on the other side, he announced his preferred destination, and stepped into the fireplace. The sensation of floo travel was one that Harry had never really grown accustomed to. He saw his target fireplace growing closer, and braced himself.

His landing was not quite as smooth as he had hoped, but he managed to stay upright. A good thing, because to say that Rufus Scrimgeour was surprised to see him standing there would be an understatement. It would have been so much worse had he sprawled on the floor.

"My word, I'm not sure if I can really believe what I'm seeing," Rufus muttered.

"You aren't going mad, if that is what has you concerned," Harry reassured him as he dusted off his Hogwarts robes. "Well, at the very least, I am not an illusion or hallucination."

"I suppose that's always good to know. Of course, if I was losing my faculties, the people I imagined seeing would insist that they are real," the older man countered.

Harry decided to get to the point. "I don't have much time, as you might imagine. I had to borrow the only fireplace that wasn't being watched."

“That of Dolores Umbridge? I’m somewhat astounded you made it there. She’s rather famously paranoid.”

“I had a good distraction.”

“I’m sure. So, now that I’m nearly certain you aren’t a figment of my imagination, what can I do for you, Mr. Potter?”

“You can allow me the use of your fireplace. There’s one individual that I’d like to be here before we start negotiating.”

“Of course,” Rufus said. Harry checked his watch. Come on.

Two minutes later than planned, the fire flared, and Aiden Greengrass was ejected from the fireplace. Rufus Scrimgeour blinked in disbelief. “Well, I wasn’t expecting that.”

“Not that I’d expect you to,” Aiden replied smoothly. “I’m not sure we’ve ever been properly introduced.”

“We haven’t, but that doesn’t mean I don’t know who you are.”

“I’m somewhat relieved, then.” Scrimgeour raised an eyebrow.

“As I was saying, we really must move quickly,” Harry said, breaking up the little dance.

“Dare I ask what you want from me, Harry, that you would bring a man like this into my office?”

Harry took a deep breath. “I want you to lead a coup and bring down Fudge’s government.”

Rufus seemed utterly unfazed. “Well, I’m in favor of the general idea. Any thoughts as to the specifics? You see, overthrowing popularly-elected governments tends to get a bit complicated. Especially when they are as paranoid as this one.”

“So you do recognize the need for Fudge’s removal from power?”

“Certainly,” Rufus said. “Every minute he delays our preparation, denies requests for increased funds for battle training for my Aurors, vetoes a proposed enlistment drive, ignores minor events like Azkaban being broken open, and generally spends most of his day covering his own arse, is a minute lost, and another minute closer to Lord Voldemort’s victory.”

“And here I was expecting that I’d need to convince you.”

Scrimgeour raised a finger. “Harry, you are not finished yet. I certainly sympathize with you. I certainly believe your account of Voldemort’s return, and the events of the last year provide more than ample evidence that the threat is real. But that does not mean I will just march into the office of Cornelius Fudge and inform him of his early retirement.”

Harry tried to regain his balance. “Of course not.”

“Very well. You see I am in a bit of a bind. Fudge has a great deal of support from the Light families, even if that support isn’t quite as strong as it once was. And several of my very good friends have already been arrested for conspiracy against the government. The position that I hold at this moment is of greater importance to me than just about anything. If I lose it, then I lose any chance of making a difference in this war.”

“I appreciate that, sir, but...”

“No, I don’t think you do, Mr. Potter. And you’ve shown it by bringing that filth into my office.” Harry glanced to Aiden for his reaction, but his expression was unchanged. “I’m of half a mind to order that both of you are arrested, because this kind of reckless stunt is precisely what I’ve been doing my best to stay well away from. Why do you think that I am still free when Amelia and Heather are under house arrest? It’s because I’m keeping my hands clean, and letting everyone else do the dirty work. It comes down to the fact that I am

simply more important than they are. Perhaps that comes off as downright selfish and conceited, but I will not waver on that front. I suggest you leave, immediately, so that you can use this as a learning experience and avoid what is sure to be a most unpleasant punishment from Dolores.”

Harry could sense something else happening here. “Sir, it’s precisely for that reason that I’ve come to you. There isn’t a man or woman in better position to move against Fudge. You have the Aurors at your command. You are a veteran leader and an experienced politician. I don’t know how to organize a coup. They do not teach that at Hogwarts.”

“I should hope not. Let’s set aside for a moment the matter of whether I’ll do what you ask. Why is Aiden Greengrass, a man who represents the elite of everything I despise, sully my office.”

Aiden finally spoke. “Rufus, I’m here as evidence that it is not merely Harry that is asking you to take this risk. I cannot claim to represent all of the currently unaligned Dark families. But I have, through some brutal negotiation and arm twisting, convinced a sizable number of them to go along with this, in exchange for the possibility of a dialogue on some of the older restrictions.”

Scrimgeour shot Aiden a look of pure loathing. “If I had my way, the entire lot of you would be begging to be allowed to keep your wands.”

“I realize that your feelings on the matter are not the same as mine. But I do know that you are a realist and a pragmatic man. You cannot crush the Dark. Not without resorting to tactics beyond the pale. You base your moral superiority upon your resistance to more aggressive and violent methods. Are you any better than us if you let that control slip?” Aiden argued, his voice quiet and level.

“So, Aiden, you are saying that if I overthrow Fudge, I might actually have some unexpected allies? How can I believe that? I can’t imagine this idea has made you very popular with your peers.”

“I’ve never survived because I’ve been popular. I’ve survived and lived up to my family name because I am smarter than the rest, and because, most importantly, I am right. And that’s been proven enough times that I can get even the most defiant families to march in line. You have my word, as a wizard and as a man dedicated heart and soul to the defeat of the Dark Lord.”

Rufus eyed him suspiciously, but Harry could feel some of the ice starting to melt in the room.

“I suppose that will have to be enough, then,” Scrimgeour replied softly. He turned his gaze to Harry. “You came to the right person. I have indeed made contingency plans, I do have contacts, I do have a great deal of personal power. That doesn’t mean that any action is without terrible risk. And we cannot leave a vacuum. Someone must step in to replace Fudge.”

Harry met the old warrior’s eyes. “I’ve thought about that, too.”

Scrimgeour’s aura of confidence and indignation vanished instantly. “Do you have any idea what you are doing, Harry? Before I even entertain the notion, I must make it absolutely clear to you that, no matter what your childish fancies to the contrary, I am not a moderate. I am a conservative Light wizard that will not hesitate to do exactly what I feel should be done for just any reason, be it personal or political.”

Harry realized at that instant what Scrimgeour was saying. At first he wanted to back out, to say it had been a mistake to count on him to be the next Minister of Magic, but he resisted. “When crimes have been committed, and there is no question of guilt, the perpetrators must be punished. Always.” Something shattered deep inside of Harry as he spoke, his voice a lifeless monotone. It’s not just a betrayal. It’s a death sentence.

Scrimgeour eyed him, a touch of humanity shining through his ever-so-slightly softened tone of voice. “I’m glad that we have an understanding, Mr. Potter.”

“So am I.” It hurt. It killed him to say it. But Harry would not waver.

“And you, Aiden? You are willing to throw your support and that of your allies behind me? You are willing to offer legitimacy to one that, in an ideal universe, would purge Britain of the Darkness, in all of its forms, forever?”

“War makes strange bedfellows, does it not?” Aiden asked, the volume of his voice just above a whisper. “My allies and I are willing to do anything that must be done. Nothing more. Nothing less.”

“And who will make that distinction?”

Aiden frowned with slight puzzlement. “Why, Harry, of course.”

Harry hadn’t been expecting that. Scrimgeour looked at him with a great deal of skepticism. “Even if I trusted the boy’s judgment absolutely, which I cannot say of anyone, including myself, what possible reason is there for your comrades in Darkness to pay the slightest heed to his words?”

“Perhaps that is a gamble you will have to take, Rufus. Don’t play me for a fool. You may claim that you have left the “dirty work” to others as you so put it, but I have my sources in the Ministry and out of it. You know that Fudge has to be stopped. And you’d rather die before you let the Dark win, especially if that victory could be traced to criminal incompetence on account of the ministry and personal cowardice on the part of yourself. You have here a golden opportunity. You can make your move, and be nearly certain of the support of a significant number of unlikely and powerful allies. That is the best I can offer you,” Aiden said, his voice hard as steel.

“Is it?” asked Scrimgeour.

“It is. And you are going to take it,” Harry said softly.

“And why is that, Mr. Potter? Hmmm? Why would I take such a rotten deal?”

Harry met his eyes. "Because you would never forgive yourself. Even in death. And you can't live with that guilt."

Scrimgeour was quiet for a long moment, and Harry wondered if he'd overstated the case. Then the Head of the Aurors nodded firmly. "It will be done. I will be in contact, Aiden, through appropriate means. Mr. Potter, I ask that you be patient. You will know when the time has come."

Aiden looked genuinely surprised. "Now that, Mr. Potter, was impressive."

Scrimgeour shook his head. "I will rue the day I let my mind be decided by the earnest voice of a child. But I promise is a promise."

"I won't let you down, sir," Harry whispered quietly.

Scrimgeour nodded. "I know that, Harry. Or, at the very least, I know that I will never get a chance to tell you that you've failed me while you are still alive. I am impressed by your courage, Harry. I question your judgment, but for better or worse, you are facing something down that has sent many grown men fleeing in terror. And for that, Mr. Potter, I cannot help but admire you."

Harry felt a shiver go down his back. The die is cast...

A/N: Well hello everyone! I'm not dead, indeed I'm about as healthy as I've been in a while, even if I haven't fully recovered from what was a pretty tough year.

A few weeks ago, I went over my outlines of the rest of this series, and for the first time in quite a few months, I was excited about Grey Maiden. I sat around during my summer job desperate to get back to my laptop and get back to working on this rather ambitious project. There are so many things that I have planned, some of which I came up with during my recess. I promise you, this world isn't going to get any less complex and mysterious. Because that's the way I like it.

The chapter featured some major personal growth on the part of Harry. I'm confident I can find a way to make all of this believable; well, as believable as a story taking place in a world of magic can be. I hope you'll like.

Next update shouldn't be dreadfully long in coming. I'm about half-way through the next chapter, and my beta and I are getting back into the game.

Get ready for a wild ride!

Chris Widger

Chapter 14: Choices

Time passes rather slowly when you are anxiously awaiting the fall of your government, Harry mused. It had been two days since his covert meeting with Scrimgeour had sealed Fudge's fate. His remarkably uneventful return had been much easier; the office had been empty when Harry arrived (he had, of course, used a charm taught by Remus to make sure that was the case); with Umbridge still away cleaning up the monumental mess the Weasley twins had left in their wake. And what a mess it was: a fully formed swamp in one of the most frequently used corridors in the castle. And a smelly one, too, meaning that more than just the actual swamp was inaccessible to human beings. There had also been the celebratory near-riot in the immediate aftermath of the Weasleys' dramatic escape. Harry wished he could have seen it.

In response, Umbridge had imposed truly draconian measures, including setting curfew immediately after dinner and requiring professors to report whenever they met with a student for any reason. She was looking for some way, any way, to regain control of the situation. Harry smiled at the irony. Any day now...

He wandered silently down around the lake, for about an hour, staring out over the cold, misty waters on this chilly January day, not really thinking about anything in particular. After finishing a massive essay for McGonagall, he had decided a mental break was in order. While he often found himself on the shores of the lake to agonize or mope, he went there in those cases because he found the solitude he could achieve out there surprisingly relaxing. Harry let a bit of his magic prod behind him, searching for other souls. He found none. He was almost surprised that Umbridge hadn't assigned him a tail.

As he reached out further, he did find someone. He couldn't tell how far he or she was with his rudimentary mental skills, but there was definitely another sentient being who might have the same idea - to seek some solitude. Curious, Harry continued to circle the lake. Eventually, he found what he'd sensed. A day of painful memories came rushing back as he quickly realized who she was, and why she was here. Somehow, he'd forgotten what day it was.

“Hello Fleur,” Harry said quietly.

Either she hadn’t heard him, or she was deliberately ignoring him, because she didn’t move a muscle or say a word. A part of Harry told him to leave her to her grief and go back inside to warm up. For whatever reason, he ignored the impulse.

“You came back,” Harry said, slightly louder.

“I did,” Fleur Delacour replied simply, her accent not quite as heavy as it had been the previous year. “Surely you know why.”

She turned to face him. She wore a black winter coat and scarf that somehow failed to obscure her magnificent form. Her brilliant silver hair fell straight down, with a few stray strands hanging in front of her face. Her blue eyes were clouded with grief, and the redness of her cheeks stood out starkly against her otherwise fair skin. She was gorgeous.

Harry tried to take his mind off of that and moved closer. Fleur moved away, but stopped when she reached a large boulder a few feet away and sat down gently, staring out at the lake. “So young. I don’t even remember what it was like to be zat age. Her life, her dreams ahead of her. Her first time out of ze country, come to support her grande soeur.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Everyone is? And how could they not be? My sister died because I failed to rescue her.”

“That’s not fair,” Harry replied, his voice rising a bit in intensity. “If anyone of us is to blame for what happened, it’s me.”

“ ‘Ermione did not die. Cedric’s girlfriend did not die. They were stronger than me. They reached their hostages. I did not. And Gabrielle paid ze price.”

“You would have been killed too.”

“Potter, zat bomb was meant for you, but it did not trigger until you had arrived. If I had been faster than you, no one would ‘ave died.”

Harry grimaced. He couldn’t really argue with that. Fleur wasn’t done. “And I should have been. You were just a boy. Perhaps more than I first thought, but I was the pride of Beauxbatons. You weren’t even the champion of your own school. I came in dead last. I would have been humiliated if I could have spared the care. If I hadn’t already lost the only thing I cared about.”

Fleur stood, flailing herself about in a circle, as if mad, arms outstretched. “She was such an energetic child, so full of joie de vivre. Everyday was an adventure to her. It was too much for my parents sometimes. She was a Delacour, after all. Childish fun and games were fine for the time being, but sooner or later, she’d ‘ave to grow up. And yet there was nothing that I loved more than playing hide-and-seek with ‘er on our estate. She was quite the tree climber.” Fleur finally stopped spinning about and collapsed to the ground, bringing her head down to her knee like a drunken ballerina. Harry moved closer, somewhat concerned. She noticed, staring into his eyes from underneath her left arm. “What have I become, Harry?” she asked. “I came ‘ere to remember Gabrielle, to do honor to her memory. My parents do not even know zat I am ‘ere. Madam Maxime allowed me to leave without informing them; I’m working at the school now, you know. And here I am, falling to pieces once more.”

“You are allowed to mourn, even after you feel that you shouldn’t. You never get over death, really.” Harry supposed that his comments weren’t exactly encouraging. But Fleur seemed to understand what he was trying to say, even though it didn’t seem to help.

“Ze time for mourning has come and gone. Gabrielle was so full of life...she would have wanted me to move on and make the best of things. To live the life for her that she didn’t ‘ave the chance to live.”

“You’re certainly putting a lot of pressure on your own shoulders. How can you go about everyday trying to live like that?”

“No one said it would be easy. It can’t be easy. But facile or non, I will do it, Harry. Because I have no other way to make it up to her. I cannot say sorry, I cannot apologize for being weak and foolish. I cannot reassure her that everything will be alright, because I don’t know anything about that.”

Fleur’s voice was rising in emotionally intensity, and tears glistened in her eyes. “Would you like me to go?” Harry asked quietly.

Surprisingly, the older girl shook her head. “Non. Please stay. I do not want to be alone right now. I don’t know what I might do with myself.”

Harry moved closer. He supposed he rather preferred helping someone else with their own problems to constantly dumping his own on his friends. It helped even out some kind of cosmic emotional scales. He dropped to one knee next to her, then sat, his feet outstretched toward the chilly lake. “Harry,” she asked, “how did you grow up without your parents? Do you remember them? Do you miss them?”

It was a very personal question, but nonetheless Harry didn’t terribly mind answering it. “I don’t really know. I have some memories of my parents. Images, smells, noises, a feeling of warmth and security that just can’t be duplicated by anyone but your own blood relatives. Daphne was a mother to me, and she made my life so much more bearable. She treated me as if I were her own son, and I suppose that made losing my parents not seem quite as bad.”

Fleur nodded, blinking as a tear traced down her cheek. “Do you miss them?” she asked again.

Harry pondered that, and came to a surprisingly decisive conclusion. “No. I really don’t. I miss Daphne dreadfully, but that’s a rather different story.”

“Of course. Things weren’t perfect between you, ne sont pas?”

They were now getting into a very sensitive area. Truth be told, Harry had done his best not to think about his history with his surrogate

mother, good times and especially the bad ones. He had to be objective, he had to be ready to let Daphne suffer the punishment for her deeds, was it deserved, when and if Scrimgeour and the legal authorities judged it to be necessary. He had a feeling that one of the major things that led to Scrimgeour agreeing to stage a coup was his willingness to look at the greater picture and not ask justice and order to be compromised for the sake of a loved one, something very few people of Harry's age could do. Even now, he wondered if he'd made the right choice. Sure, securing Scrimgeour's support was crucial, but was it, or indeed anything at all, worth betraying the only family he had left, the only person he knew he could trust absolutely? For as much as he loved Hermione and Ginny they couldn't offer the same kind of undying loyalty to him that burned in Daphne's heart...for good reasons, obviously...

Fleur was staring at him now. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked that. It is not my place at all."

"It's okay," Harry replied finally. He found himself having to fight back tears and grimaced. Not now!

Fleur had moved much closer to him, a realization he hadn't made until he could feel her warm breath on his cheeks. Up close, her beauty was intoxicating, but there was more than just the looks of a girl descended from Veela. Fleur knew loss in a way that so few did. In her, Harry saw not so little of himself...

The kiss happened blindingly fast and yet in slow motion, as both participants tilted their heads and leaning forward like puppets on strings. The touch of his lips upon hers was electric; a jolt of energy seemed to course through his body, washing over his senses. Fleur deepened the kiss, and Harry's body did not hesitate to respond. He moaned softly. At that moment, the image of a heartbroken redhead lying in a hospital bed crept into his visual consciousness, and as if a switch had been flipped, suddenly his body shut down into a deep freeze. Fleur felt it, and didn't resist as he abruptly pulled away, staring wide-eyed at her. She looked down, embarrassed. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," she said, breathless. "That wasn't supposed to happen."

“But it did,” Harry replied, similarly breathless. He wondered if anyone might have seen them, but decided not to look up to check. He shivered, his heart pounding in his chest. “Fleur, I...”

She looked...disappointed, maybe. In any case, her next words just made things worse. “I know. Ze redhead. Soul mates, I suppose ze two of you are.”

“No!” Harry yelled, considerably louder than he meant to. “No, that’s...that’s not it...Ginny and I...we aren’t...”

“But you are,” Fleur observed sadly. “I am sorry. I should have known. Perhaps there is too much of my grandmother in me.”

“No, Fleur, that isn’t...”

“You may not believe it now, but such things exist. My parents, for example. They were meant for each other. Both of them were able to find their way out of arranged marriages. They met on a country road in Burgundy. She was fifteen, picking apples with her younger sister. He was eighteen, running about the countryside with his best friend Andre. Two years later, they were married.”

“Maybe that was destiny, or fate, or what have you,” Harry conceded. “But that doesn’t mean that there was anything more than just your average teenage relationship between me and Ginny.”

Fleur actually laughed. “You try so hard to deny it, when I have not even said that it was true. I am not passing judgment on you and the redhead, what you had together. These things cannot be known until they have come to pass. But perhaps you should consider the possibility that there was something greater.”

Harry shook his head. No, he told himself. This ‘soul mate’ business was nonsense, utter nonsense. My parents getting together was highly unlikely too, that doesn’t mean there was anything more to it. Daphne loved Edmund more than life itself. Who’s to say my mother’s love for James Potter was more intense or special somehow?

Fleur giggled this time, her cheeks flushing a bit with embarrassment. "Harry, consider the physical evidence. There are not many men that would be able to stop themselves at that point. Indeed, I don't believe that has ever happened before."

"It's a romantic notion," Harry finally got out. "That doesn't mean it has any relation to reality."

Fleur sighed. "Then perhaps I am a romantic. It's not such a bad thing." She got up, her cheeks flushed again. "I should be going. I've been here long enough." She began to move off, presumably intending to clear the wards and Apparate back home.

"Fleur?"

She turned. "Oui?"

"This...all of this isn't going to..." he laughed nervously, like a child whose hand had been caught in the cookie jar. "It doesn't..."

"Non," she said, with what might have been a trace of regret. "It means whatever you want it to mean. If that is nothing, than it is so." Her eyes were slightly downcast, although whether it was from disappointment or embarrassment he couldn't be sure.

She walked off into the distance, leaving Harry sitting on the frozen shore, even more baffled than ever. Could Fleur be right? Was there something more that had drawn Harry James Potter and Ginevra Molly Weasley together?

He really didn't have an answer to that one.

Aiden Greengrass let out an enormous sigh of relief as he appeared back within the walls of his own manor. It was done. It had been like pulling teeth, but perhaps he'd finally made the progress he'd been working at for so long. Perhaps he and the rest of the Dark families could unite and look past their differences, to the point where Scrimgeour could at least count on them to act as one, for better or worse.

“That was quite the performance, my friend.”

Aiden spun round, hand flying to the pocket where his maple wand was kept. He relaxed slightly when he saw who it was. It didn't mean he was any less surprised to see Stefano Zabini. “What in the bloody blazes are you doing here?” he hissed. “No one can follow me inside my own wards. I saw you not five minutes before I left.”

“Yes, you did,” Stefano replied, amusement twinkling in his eyes. “And all wards can be circumvented with the right expertise and a little creativity.”

Aiden took in a deep breath. There was no point in being outraged over this. He needed to save his energy for more worthy adversaries. “I believe I've suffered enough for one day. If you are here to torment me further, I most insist that you leave.”

Stefano raised an eyebrow. “Torment you? I wouldn't dream of it, my friend. I was genuinely impressed. By the gall of those calling you a traitor to us all, that is.”

“Yes, that was quite rich coming from Davies,” Aiden agreed. “The man practically ran for the hills when the Dark Lord came calling last time.”

“As did my wife and I,” Stefano acknowledged with a shrug. “They called us cowards at the time, but I have never been terribly attached to this little Island, or its wizards. I was merely protecting my own family, and my line.”

That stung, though Aiden wasn't sure if it was meant to, or if Stefano had, as he was occasionally wont to do, merely spoken without thinking. Not that he'd ever apologize publicly even if he felt that was the case. “Perhaps you made a wiser choice than I,” he said softly. “In any case, I never professed loyalty to the Dark Lord.”

“No, you merely managed to avoid making a statement one way or the other until the very last moment,” Stefano replied. “But this line of argument is rather pointless. I’ll leave you to your delusions.”

“Thank you,” Aiden said. He moved to the bar. “Would you like something to drink? I have a feeling you aren’t just dropping by.”

“That sounds wonderful, actually. Your choice.”

Aiden considered giving him some of the extraordinary potent stuff that had once nearly killed one of his houseguests, but decided to be charitable. Firewhiskey it was. He chilled the glasses with a quick spell, and handed one over to his guest. Zabini looked at it suspiciously. “I trust you haven’t poisoned this.”

“Stefano, trust me, if I wanted to, I could find far more satisfying ways of killing you than poisoning your drink.” Without inviting him to do likewise, Aiden sank into an armchair. He felt like he’d run a marathon. His heart was certainly beating fast enough.

Stefano dragged another chair over, the legs scraping against the polished wooden floor. “So, friend,” he said, taking a sip from his firewhiskey, “how do you think that went?”

“I’m still alive, aren’t I?” Aiden quipped. “It could have gone better, but it most certainly could have gone worse. The bottom line is that most of the families I wanted are on-board, and more importantly, the others aren’t going to stand in the way. I’ll write Harry and Scrimgeour in a few days, once I’m sure things are relatively settled, and let them know that this is as good as it is going to get with Voldemort around.”

Stefano looked curious. “Who were you hoping to get?”

Aiden tried to recall the mental list. “Well, you and your wife, obviously, though I doubted that would be a problem, given your son’s closeness to Harry. I badly wanted Radetsky and Lynch, and they were surprisingly little trouble. I did lose Davies, though I expect he’ll come around; he won’t stand to be out of the action for so long. I already knew I had Wilkes and the Burke brothers. I’m honestly not

sure if their joining up had a positive or negative impact. The Moorwoods were a tough sell. I thought I might have lost Terrence the second I opened my mouth. I just hope I'm able to keep my promise about their old estate. I don't want them coming after me."

"Hell, if the Ministry wins, I think Scrimgeour will be willing to do just about anything within reason. He's a pragmatist through and through. Why upset us when appeasing us isn't all that costly? Fudge is afraid to tread on the toes of some of his allies in government. I don't sense that Rufus has any such inhibitions," Stefano reasoned. "And," he said with a dark smile, "if it all goes to hell, I have a feeling that you won't be around to see it."

"You are correct about that one. The Dark Lord owes me a debt, a debt of blood. The blood of my family. And I will collect that debt, or I will die in the effort," Aiden declared, a bit more forcefully than intended.

"Relax, friend. We'll all get our chance at martyrdom soon enough. Who else were you betting on? McKinnon? Byrnes? Morgan?"

"Absolutely," Aiden said. "In fact, if I couldn't secure their support I was just about ready to end the meeting right there and then."

Stefano looked surprised. "You're joking? You would have gathered everyone together, heard a few nays, and broken it up?"

"How exactly am I supposed to unite the Dark purebloods if I can't secure the support of the foremost Dark families in Scotland and Wales? I know that the families have gradually moved back into England over the years, but that is our heritage, our heartland. Byrnes was absolutely essential. And I might say the same of Morgan."

"Interesting. Neither of them came easily."

"No, they didn't," Aiden agreed, taking a long, thoughtful drink from his tumbler. "Since we were at Hogwarts together, as a rule, Jackson Byrnes and I have not agreed on anything. The man sabotaged a

half-dozen potential alliances once just to foul up some negotiations between myself and Lucretia Bulstrode. And I'll be damned if he didn't think it well-worth the effort."

Stefano nodded. "So how did you manage it this time?"

"Simple. I threatened him."

"With?"

"The release of some documents that he and his family would very much never want to see the light of day. Oh, you saw him grandstanding, calling Potter a fraud and me a hopeless, ignorant bastard, going on and on about the feud between his family and Scrimgeour's, but it was all posturing."

"How did you know?"

"Because Jackson doesn't grandstand unless he's trying to convince someone of something. He's amazingly good at it. But if you've known him long enough, you see right through it. I knew I had him the moment he cut me off."

Stefano smirked. "That was quite a line...what was it...‘Our very survival depends on someone who would see us imprisoned and marginalized?’"

"Something like that. I hadn't exactly written a speech. I guessed, correctly as it turned out, that I'd be deviating quite a bit from what I had prepared. I can't believe that Gamp was arguing the issue of immunity. He knows that Scrimgeour can't offer that. He didn't care."

"Do you worry about him?"

"Not terribly. We got his vote because of Elizabeth Castlegard. He's targeting her for his son Dagon's wife in a year or two."

"Dagon attends Durmstrang, right?"

“He did. Samael withdrew him without explanation last year. There’s another small school in Prussia that I think he attends now. Samael’s second cousin, Johan Krantz, runs it.”

“I’ve heard some about it. How big an operation have they managed?”

“Maybe a score of students, a couple of instructors. It’s not much, but Johan’s attempting to market it as a more ‘practical’ alternative to Durmstrang. I believe that Sean Moorwood finished just last year.” Aiden took another swig of his drink. “In any case, Gamp is of little concern. I would not trust the man farther than I could spit, and even then, I’d be careful to make sure he never saw my back. He’s one that Harry needs to watch out for. If you know him, you know he’s scum, but he makes rather different first impressions.”

“How well do you know the young man, Aiden?”

“We’ve spoken a few times, and I sent him a letter recently that seems to have done him some good, according to Daphne. A wakeup call, I suppose it was. It’s not much, but it’s a start.”

“You are referring to this new defense club being run under the nose of Umbridge?”

“That’s the one,” Aiden said. “Basic defensive magic, I expect, but it’s better than what they were getting from the Ministry program. I sometimes have trouble understanding our Minister. He knows that the Dark Lord has returned. It’s one thing to deny it in public, it’s another to facilitate the slaughter of the next generation of British wizards by leaving them utterly untrained.”

“I am also quite displeased by that. Most of the students I care about can take care of themselves, but I have no tolerance for negligence and complacency, especially amongst the young. That is how we got into this mess in the first place. The First War was a distant memory, and magical warfare was a thing of the past. The most challenging assignments the Aurors had were tracking down smugglers. And then it all came undone.”

Aiden finished his glass, and rose to pour another. "The bottom line, Stefano, is that we both recognize the greatest reason that we have to, this once, support a man that would see our freedom to practice the old ways and the magic that is our heritage confiscated, is because if Fudge remains, most of us will be dead before he gets the chance."

"War makes strange bedfellows. I recall my father cursing the earth upon which Lawrence Scrimgeour walked when I was a boy."

"How are your parents, by the way?"

"They prosper, as always. They have no intention whatsoever of ever leaving Sardinia. Though perhaps it would be polite to warn the Dark Lord that if he ever ventures over to that place, he should be wary around the trees. Venture too close and they might break his neck. My father takes such matters rather seriously. And he ought to avoid the local cuisine."

Aiden smirked at that, despite the gravity of the situation. Arabella Zabini hadn't put Stefano's family on the map, but rather, merely added an exclamation point to a legacy begun with her husband's parents. In their day, Fiona and Phillipe Zabini had been renowned, the latter for his spectacular and rare ability to manipulate trees like puppets, turning them into living weapons and the former for a knowledge of poisons and creativity of mind so great that it was said several men had died from the very fear that one of her exquisite agony-causing potions had been sprinkled on their food. But both had retired about 10 years ago, intending to live out the rest of their lives in peace and serenity. It was an odd exit for a once so electric duo. With the Dark Lord having returned, perhaps they'd been prescient.

"I'm certain that your parents are more than capable of looking after themselves. The question is the newest generation. We cannot forget that even if the Dark Lord is defeated, if the cost to our children is high, he may yet succeed in erasing the presence of wizards and witches from the British Isles. We stand on the edge of a demographical precipice, Stefano. The fact is that, if we lose a

significant number of the younger generation in this war, unless there is widespread breeding between wizards and Muggles or large-scale immigration of magical populations from mainland Europe, our people will die out,” Aiden said.

“I do not mean to sound accusatory, Aiden. But I did not take you for a bigot.”

“You refer to my comment about breeding with Muggles, no doubt,” Aiden said. “I have nothing against non-purebloods, Stefano. While I believe that pureblood families produce stronger wizards and witches, the evidence is more ambiguous. But Muggles and Muggleborns pose a threat to us in that they threaten the survival of some of the oldest magical families. It is they who carry the torch of the previous generations, our traditions, our heritage. How can Muggles or those born of them do the same? They live partly immersed in another world, a world without magic. We live in the world of our parents. It is up to us, and to our sons and daughters, to preserve the rich history, wealth, and power of wizards. We are meant to be greater than Muggles, Stefano, of that I am absolutely certain. Why else would we have been given such abilities, such power? I believe in the separation of the magical and Muggle worlds, but I also believe in, well, call it a clandestine dictatorship, if you will. Muggles cannot be allowed to threaten our way of life. And the only way to insure that does not happen is to stay one step ahead of them. And the only way that can be guaranteed is if the power structures that exist today are preserved.”

“A nuanced position, though slightly more extreme than I was expecting.”

“And you, Stefano? Where do you stand on the issue?”

“I do not know, Aiden. The difference between you and me is that I believe that the path of the Wizarding world is fiercely unpredictable, that it is subject to forces we cannot control or account for.”

“I suppose that is fair. Are you talking about destiny? Fate?”

“Perhaps that is what I see at work. I believe in the freedom of the individual, Aiden, to make choices, to have the power to forge one’s own destiny. Some are born to make choices with greater consequences, but they remain free to dictate the course of their own life and those of others.”

Aiden nodded slowly. “I think I understand.”

“Good. Then we can move on. Aiden, I spoke of those born to make more important choices. There is one in particular that we should be greatly concerned with.”

Aiden nodded. “Perhaps we could guide him along, but I’ve resisted so far because we may lose any chance of cooperation with Scrimgeour if it looks like we are meddling outright in Harry’s life.”

“Again, true, but not what I meant to emphasize. We are not the only ones that understand his importance. In gathering support, sounding Potter’s clarion call, you have drawn attention to him. He is in great danger, Aiden. Harry’s greatest power over the Dark Lord right now is that of uncertainty. The Dark Lord has seen him perform some incredible feats, and at times appear as helpless as a newborn child. Sooner or later, he will seek to determine which of these is closer to the truth.”

“You believe he will start setting challenges for Potter.”

“There is some other thing going on here. I’ve heard rumors of a prophecy, though I don’t know what to make of them.”

Aiden nodded. He’d heard the same rumblings. Prophecy was a tricky concept. Occasionally, they could define an era or change the course of history itself. Other times, they could be ambiguous, even meaningless. It was because of the former that the word “prophecy” still held such grand importance. But all too often, it was the latter than proved to be the case. And the field of Divination itself, in Aiden’s mind, was unreliable at best, its effectiveness ruined by false visions and egotistical frauds. To make things worse, reliable Prophecy sometimes came from what would seem to be the most

unreliable of sources. "You think his life may be in danger? How is this not to be expected?"

"He will always be a target, of course. But I have heard reports, some of them from people I would trust with my life. The Dark Lord is planning something, and Harry is at its center. We need to be ready, for I do not believe that he is."

"I agree. What do you suggest? Should we alert Harry?"

"What will he do with such a warning? Eventually, he has to face the worst the world has to throw at him. What we need to do is insure is that the first time he fails is not also his last."

"I don't like this. Harry is not our champion. He's a young man with much growing left to do. You are suggesting we leave him oblivious to the increased threat to his life?"

Stefano finished his firewhiskey. "Yes, Aiden. That is exactly what I am suggesting. We cannot continue to coddle him. Providing a safety net is not the same thing as fighting his battles for him. Perhaps he will be up to the challenge. It is as important for us to know where he is in his stage of development as it is for the Dark Lord, Aiden. Like him, we are making bets without knowing what cards we have in our hand. We're gambling with our lives, and the sooner we understand if we guessed right or wrong, the better things will be."

Aiden closed his eyes. "I could never do this to Daphne," he said softly.

Stefano started to reply, and then hesitated. Aiden wasn't surprised; Blaise Zabini had been under a tremendous amount of pressure from his youth. Would Stefano gambling with his sole heir's life? Probably not. Would Arabella? That was a very interesting question. "Fortunately, my friend, it is not our own blood that we are risking."

"I disagree," Aiden said. "If Harry dies, then my line will end. I will not run away again. I cannot bear the shame."

“And if your line is extinguished?”

“Then perhaps that is how things were meant to be,” Aiden remarked.

Stefano gave his friend and ally a look of the utmost respect. “Then I will pray for you,” the staunch Roman Catholic replied.

Aiden didn’t identify with any particular religion. But that didn’t mean he saw such a gesture as meaningless. “Thank you, my friend.”

There was little in the world that Severus Snape hated more than ceremony. It didn’t particularly matter what the context was; any man that would insist upon it revealed a bloated sense of self-importance, to the extent where he or she wished to have an event quite literally scripted around them. He’d had to endure his fair lot of the grandstanding lately; Dolores Umbridge was relishing her new role, and it seemed only a matter of time before she attempted to push Dumbledore out.

At least it could be said that the ceremony surrounding Umbridge was meaningless and little more than a balm to her ego. He could certainly not say the same of the individual he was about to encounter for the first time in almost 14 years. He had known this day would come; he’d done his best to give the Dark Lord no reason to suspect his loyalties might be suspect. After all, it had been he who gave Voldemort the piece of information he’d been so intent to gain. Peter Pettigrew may have betrayed the Potters, but Severus Snape had set the hunt in motion. It was something he hoped to keep secret the rest of his life; indeed, there were times when he looked upon his miserable existence as penance for the sin he committed that night, the sin of allowing the woman he loved to die. Now the child that she had given her life to protect had become his student, and he one of the child’s mentors. The irony of the situation was painful. As much as Harry probably despised him for the sins of his school years, he wondered if he would be able to escape the room alive were Harry ever to learn that it had been he who by sheer fate, managed to overhear the first part of the Prophecy. Perhaps it was misleading to call it fate; he knew something was going to happen, or more

specifically, his master had reason to believe that was the case. In any case, he had been there, at the start of it all. He'd been present at the moment that the birth of the child of a lowly Muggleborn witch and a brainless wizard jock had taken on truly monumental importance.

Snape reeled in his thoughts and tried to let his past fade back into the recesses of his mind; it did not do him any good to be distracted and off-balance during an audience with the Dark Lord. Snape was a damn good Occlumens. If the Dark Lord were intent on ripping the truth out of his mind, Snape would probably be unable to stop him. However, the trauma such a struggle would cause would surely kill him, and at this moment, he was fairly certain that Voldemort wanted him alive. There was no doubt that the Dark Lord doubted his loyalty - the man, or whatever he had become - was no one's fool. What he did not know; indeed, could not know, was the extent to which he could trust Severus Snape. Severus knew he walked a very fine line between double agent and dead traitor, and yet, at times, the lines that seemed to blur the worst were the lines between double agent, and triple agent.

Snape wanted to believe in Dumbledore. The man, for all his faults, and there were many, had given him a second chance, one he thoroughly did not deserve, and Severus had in many ways rewarded him by remaining the same man he once was. Severus had never been inclined to participate in the more visceral Death Eater thrills; he'd never hunted Muggles like animals, never raped a helpless woman, never murdered children in front of their parents, and parents before their children. He'd merely stood by and watched as others committed those acts. Once, Rudolphus Lestrage had ordered him to hold down a young Muggle girl while he had his way with her. Then, without warning, he'd killed her. It was one of a few times that Snape had questioned his decision to join the Dark Lord. Yet his past had left few options. No one else would have him, or, to be more accurate, no one else would value him.

But the fact remained that Dumbledore's coddling and warm approach to just about everything had proven at times woefully ineffective. There had been one thing, once that Severus had valued above himself - the love of Lily Evans Potter. With her death, nothing

mattered more to him now than staying alive. And despite his hope for Harry, hopes often challenged by the boy's surprising bursts of immaturity, he remained unsure of which side offered him the best chance of survival. Severus's punishment for being on the wrong side of the last war was that he was a second-class citizen, dependent on Dumbledore for support and freedom from those that would see him in Azkaban, or worse.

"Ah, Severus, fancy seeing you here? So rarely you crawl out of Dumbledore's hole," Bellatrix Lestrange said scornfully. "How nice to see you again."

"And you, Bella," Snape said, although he'd rather be just about anywhere but in the presence of this woman. Bellatrix was his opposite in many ways, not the least among them in that her Lord and his plans took much greater precedence than her own life. And yet the woman was trapped in a paradox; Bellatrix would have liked nothing better than to have been martyred to advance the cause of the Dark Lord, yet she was so capable and valuable that such an asset that she would likely never get the chance to die a martyr's death. Bellatrix was a skilled operative, quick on her feet when her emotions didn't get the better of her, a fearsome duelist, and a ruthless and effective torturer. Snape had heard some surprising rumors concerning her latter talent; that she was grooming an apprentice. No knew if that were true or who it could be, but the possibility of another Bellatrix was certainly alarming. Still, she was getting up there in years, and since she was childless (Snape suspected that Rudolphus was infertile), it made a certain degree of sense to see her take another under her wing.

"Our Lord had spoken of your work highly, Severus. He is grateful for the loyal and dutiful service you have performed for him, and the courage and intelligence you have shown in your role." Bellatrix was ramping up the expectations on him, trying to flatter him to the point where he might stop being terrified that the Dark Lord thought his loyalties suspect. It wasn't going to work; indeed, Bellatrix had to know that Snape was not so easily distracted when something like his life was at risk.

“That is truly the highest praise, although I doubt I am worthy of it,” Snape replied cautiously.

“Perhaps that is so, but far be it from me to question my Lord’s words,” Bellatrix countered. Severus could tell that she was trying to ensnare him in a conversational trap, but the nature of it he still wasn’t sure of. “He has seen more than we could ever imagine. He has seen things beyond human understanding.”

“I am nothing in his shadow,” Snape admitted with what he hoped was convincing humility. It was time to end this contest of wills. “Bellatrix, as much as I relish the chance to speak with you, I was called here to see only one man. I cannot afford to be absent any longer than is necessary.”

“Of course, Severus. Do not let me keep you.”

Snape nodded to her, and she strode off, leaving Snape alone in the antechamber. Beyond the oak door lay the one man who really frightened him. Snape took in a deep breath, and knocked twice. The lock clicked and the door swung open of its own accord. The Dark Lord’s Throne Room, as it was called, was an expansive circular chamber carved out of solid rock, lit softly by torches along the walls, and candles beside the ebony seat of power set on a raised platform at its center. It was several thousand years old, built by a clan of Welsh Goblins wiped out during a major rebellion in the 15th century, during the height of England’s involvement in the Hundred Years’ War. It had been used as a staging area during the last war, and seemed an ideal temporary headquarters; though the Dark Lord would inevitable crave something far more majestic. The walls were covered with murals of terrible battles, and strange runes and symbols of a sort that Severus had never encountered.

A cold wind whistled through the chamber. The torches and candles flickered, and the door through which the Potions Master had entered swung shut. “Master?” Severus asked. The dais was not well lit enough for him to make out anything more than the basic outline of a throne.

“I am here, Severus. And I welcome you back to your true home.”

“I...I am honored, and grateful to be received so well. Even after I heard of your return, I was uncertain if I was still welcome among the Death Eaters.”

“I assure you that it is the case, Severus. Your skills are valuable, and you are one of my most capable - and conscientious – agents.”

“Conscientious, Lord?”

“Indeed.” The Dark Lord rose from his throne, as he did so, the room became brighter, as if the flames illuminating it had been holding back some of their light. Severus got a good look at his Master’s new form for the first time, and had to fight a wave of revulsion. He beheld a cross between a skeleton and a snake, eyes burning a fiery crimson as they had when his anger had been aroused in the past. But at the moment, Voldemort was smiling. “I am not offended, Severus, by your reaction to seeing me for the first time. This body suits my purposes, perhaps more satisfactorily than the one I once had. But it does take some getting used to.”

“I...appreciate your kindness, my lord.”

“Think nothing of it, my dear Severus. Now, though I have missed your presence at my side, I did not ask you to risk your cover merely so we could chat about old times. As I was saying before, you are one of, if not my most, conscientious agents. That is not a criticism, indeed, it is a high compliment. You see, Severus, I excel at inspiring loyalty, indeed, fanaticism, in others. Often they do excellent work. But in some cases, a scalpel, and not a battle-axe, is called for. You were always as restrained as you were loyal, Severus. I seem to remember that you saved a number of your comrades from certain death in Auror ambushes by using that mind of yours instead of charging blindly ahead.”

“I...I feel you overstate the point, Master, but I am honored that you think so highly of me.”

“Not at all, Severus. It has been a long time since we have seen each other, but from what I understand, you did everything you had to do to survive and remain in the old fool’s trust. And most laudably, you did so without sacrificing any of your comrades. The same cannot be said of many that once swore fealty to me. Igor, for one, has paid the price.”

Karkaroff had been found dead in a shack in Norway, his body disfigured almost beyond recognition. How he’d gotten there, what he was doing, and who killed him all remained a mystery, but the message sent by the brutal slaying was unmistakable.

“I am ready to serve, my Master. Merely give me orders, and I shall carry them out.”

“I am sure you feel that way, Severus. However, these orders are not to be taken lightly. For they concern one of your own students.”

“Potter.”

The Dark Lord nodded. “What is your impression of the boy, Severus? I hear that you have been a mentor to him at times.”

Severus was getting nervous, “My lord, I was merely fulfilling my duties as the boy’s Head of House.”

Voldemort laughed, a high, hissing sound that made Snape involuntarily shiver. “No need to pretend here, Severus. I know you. I know that what matters most to you is your own skin. Indeed, I certainly share that sentiment. I am not angry that you chose to, however temporarily, stake your survival on Potter and the old fool. Your true Master was gone, driven into hiding, and if you lost Dumbledore’s trust, you would likely be condemned to Azkaban, where you would lose any usefulness you might have had. These were logical decisions, Severus, and completely acceptable given the circumstances. Since you have worked with the boy, I am certain you have some insights worth sharing. Please, go ahead.”

Snape swallowed. The lines of loyalty were blurring again. The answer to the question Whose side am I on? was rather simple: Severus Snape was on the side of Severus Snape. But the reality was that he had to keep up the appearance of serving two masters. Inevitably, he'd favor one over the other. The question he faced, the terrible question, was which one he thought was going to win. "The boy is extraordinarily gifted. I do not know precisely how he acquired such power; he showed no signs of it when he first came under my tutelage, but some of the feats he has performed since his possession during his second year have been truly astounding for a boy of his age. He comes from a line of capable wizards, but this power cannot be inherited."

"No, indeed, it was not. I do not understand how it happened, but it seems exposure to my old diary resulted in Potter's power being multiplied tenfold. I must admit, Severus, that I was not at all prepared for the show of power he put on during our last meeting."

"He remains weak in a number of areas. Raw would be a charitable description of him. He approaches his situation with a combination of over-confidence and anxiety, the result being that he often find himself over his head. So far, he has not seen that come back to haunt him, but I suspect it is a matter of time."

Voldemort hissed with displeasure. "It seems an old enemy of mine has taken Potter as his champion. I should have killed the fool when I had a chance. Do you know that he intends to break my control of the Dark wizards? Or that is his aspiration, at least. He has been strong-arming some of my supporters into a loose alliance, predicated upon support of Potter. I may have underestimated him at first, for his efforts have proven far more successful than I anticipated. It is all merely a temporary problem, though. If Potter were to fall, then the alliance would fall apart. The same might be true if something were to happen to Aiden Greengrass, although I am not willing to gamble on that just yet."

"I appreciate your situation, my Lord."

“I’m sure you do, Severus. This is why I have a new mission for you. I wish to kill two birds with one stone, as the adage goes. I have been quiet for too long. It is time to make a statement. I also wish to see just what Potter is capable of. He is raw, as you say, but with some luck on his side, he can be quite dangerous. I need to determine just how much this is so before I can proceed. My initial plan to arrange a meeting between us has proven ineffective for a number of reasons. Still, I am confident that Potter will be at my mercy before Hogwarts is out, and dead shortly thereafter.”

“I do not understand.”

“Of course not, I’m being rather vague. Am I correct in saying, Severus, that Dolores Umbridge has lifted the restrictions on Hogsmeade weekends, now that more Ministry personnel are available to spy on the activities of her students.”

Snape really didn’t like where this was going. “Yes, Master, that is the case.”

“Then I believe my opportunity has come. I intend to launch an attack on Hogsmeade tomorrow. The objective of the strike team will be twofold: to cause rampant destruction, and to kill or abduct Mr. Potter.”

“What is it that you wish me to do?”

“Do not sound anxious, Severus, I will not ask you to take place in the attack itself. You are most valuable to me in your current position. What I would ask you to do is to signal that Potter is going to Hogsmeade. If he is not going, the mission will be aborted. What are the odds he will go?”

Snape tried to calm his racing heart and give the Dark Lord an accurate answer. “He’s been rather frustrated of late, and has been taking a number of strolls outdoors, including some after hours. I anticipate he will take advantage of the chance to go somewhere else for an afternoon.”

“Thank you, Severus. You will not be solely responsible for keeping us updated; I have others in position. But your help will make the chances of our success much more likely. Obviously, if word leaks out, and Dumbledore institutes extra security precautions, you are to inform me at once. This is in some ways a training exercise. I have many men and women itching to see their first combat. This will be their first chance. But I will send along enough of my best to ensure good odds of the mission being completed. They will be instructed to limit casualties amongst the students; I do not want to suddenly be facing a united front if the magical heir of a leading Light family were to be accidentally cut down.”

Snape remained silent. “You do not have a problem with these orders, do you, Severus? I would like to assure you in the most unmistakable terms that I trust you. But I should not need to warn you that if my men show up facing squads of Aurors without warning from you, I will have to question that trust.”

“I will not let you down, my Lord,” Severus said with as much confidence as he could muster. He desperately tried to keep his knees from shaking. He looked down at the floor, taking in deep breaths. He had no idea what he should do. He didn’t even know what Dumbledore would want him to do.

“I know you won’t, Severus. That is all. Return to Hogwarts and begin monitoring the situation. Await further instructions.”

“Yes, Master.”

The Dark Lord smiled gently, an expression that lost much of its tenderness because of the visage it marked. “You are dismissed, Severus.”

Snape nodded, turned on his heel, and marched out of the room. He kept going, past several clumps of chatting Death Eaters, heading for the entrance. He saw Lucius, who attempted to flag him down, but he strode past his friend. As he passed the wards, he disappeared, appearing again just outside the wards of Hogwarts. He wandered off

the beaten path, heading for cover in the woods. Once out of sight, he began to rage.

And to weep.

Harry wandered the streets of Hogsmeade. Unsurprisingly, he wasn't alone. The surprise came from who was accompanying him.

"You oughtn't frown so much, you know. It spoils your appearance."

Harry turned and looked at his companion, amused. Her cheeks were red and she was looking as though she wasn't sure why she had said that. "I guess I'll keep that in mind."

"He says, frowning." She giggled, recovering quickly. "You're like my father, always tramping around like his dog was shot." Making fun of his demeanor seemed to be her default icebreaker.

"Giselle, can we get back to the business at hand?"

"Oh very well, if we must. So you are looking for something for Valentine's Day...sort of. Something that will convey that you are sorry and still care for her, but not make you appear clingy, or even desirous of starting over."

"If such a thing exists, then yes, I'd like to give it to Ginny."

"Alright, let's see what there is..."

The raven-haired girl bounded past him. He marveled at the transformation that had taken place over a year, though on reflection, perhaps it hadn't been so much a transformation as that he'd actually had a chance to speak with her for more than five minutes after she got comfortable with her new surroundings. He'd had every reason to be deeply suspicious of her. Hogwarts rarely received exchange students. She'd been Sorted into Slytherin almost instantly. She'd sparred with him in the Library, her words enigmatic, and her answers almost defensive. And even her surname put him on alert; it didn't take an anagram genius to realize that if you switched a pair of letters,

she was suddenly related to one of Voldemort's fiercest soldiers and Edmund Dressler's murderer.

But as he'd studied her behavior this year, some of the assumptions he'd made suddenly began to collapse under their own weight. He'd seen her Nott-esque observation of the Slytherin dormitory, and immediately suspected that she was stealthily studying her surroundings, with some kind of malevolent intent. She'd seemed older and wiser than she appeared. But in the end, it seemed the word he'd been looking for and stubbornly deciding to ignore in favor of pegging her as a secret agent of the Dark Lord come to kill him in his sleep, was "shy." Once he stopped looking at her as if she was the daughter of Evan Rosier, suddenly he started to see someone very different.

Giselle Reisor was quiet. Demure. Reserved. Pretty bright, but almost embarrassed when she answered a question correctly. Not terribly talented with a wand. Somewhat sickly; she often missed classes, and while Harry had suspected duplicitous reasons for it, he'd often see her curled up in a corner of the Common Room by the fire, with a blanket and a Muggle fantasy book, pale and coughing. The more he thought about it, the more that behavior looked genuine, and her first few days looked like a performance of false confidence. Her grades were almost exactly average. She would sometimes stay up late in the Common Room reading. He'd seen her speaking quietly to Peter Lowry a few days ago, and whatever she said seemed to help. The boy had been avoiding Harry of late. It was tough to blame him. Harry scared himself these days.

But despite all of these things, Harry was still inclined to think that something was strange. He'd heard of her father almost every conversation they had, however brief. But he had no idea who her father was, where he lived, or if she had any other family. He figured she probably had a few friends, particularly amongst the younger Slytherins, but she ate silently on the rare occasion she emerged from the dungeons and made it to a meal.

There was one thing of which he was certain. She had a major crush on him. That, or she was doing an amazing job of pretending that was the case. And it wasn't as though he'd decided that his initial

impression had been completely wrong; she was still an enigma, and that made her potentially dangerous. But Hermione said she was going to spend the day with Lisa Turpin, whom she hadn't spoken to in some time, Ginny rarely spoke a word to him, Luna was on a date with a rather befuddled Neville, and Blaise was engaged in...well, the best way to describe it was a prolonged flirting session with Elisha Moon, who was tolerating it for the time being. So when he encountered Giselle leaving a clothing store, and she smiled warmly at him (though her cheeks went red), he'd been grateful for the company.

For now, at least, he decided to just leave it be and enjoy her company. They entered a store specializing in magical trinkets of greatly varying quality and price. Giselle vanished for a few minutes, probably using the loo. Harry was trying to find something clever, something that might make Ginny have a happy moment associated with him for the first time in a while. He didn't know what had happened during her vacation, but he imagined there had been a whole lot of crying. And he was helpless to do anything about it, because he truthfully didn't know how he felt anymore, and more importantly, didn't know how to handle this situation. At least this was something.

"Check out this, Harry," Giselle said brightly. Harry smiled when he saw what she was holding. It was brilliant stuffed dragon, enchanted with a simple spell that made it appear to shimmer and move, occasionally shooting a burst of fire into the air, though it was utterly harmless. For most girls, that might have been a good choice. But given Harry's history...

"Maybe not," Harry said, putting the dragon back on the shelf. Giselle looked disappointed. "It was a good try, but, you remember last year."

She smacked her forehead with her palm. "Oh bugger, of course I do. How thoughtless of me. I can be really clueless sometimes."

Harry stared at her for a moment. "Giselle, I appreciate the help, really, I do. But why?"

The girl looked a bit taken aback. "Why? Well, I'm your friend, aren't I?"

"Look, it's not that I don't like you Giselle...well, I think I like you. And that's the problem, really. I don't know you at all. Last year..."

"Oh, bugger last year," the girl exclaimed. "I'm sorry. I've really messed this up. I just...Dad told me I had to be strong, had to make him proud and I didn't want to disappoint him and look like an idiot. So I said things, I acted in ways that aren't me."

Harry blinked. Well, that seemed to confirm a number of his suspicions. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked like that."

"Do you want me to leave?"

"No...just, forget what I said...this is fun. It's nice, relaxing, casual. That kind of thing just doesn't happen to me all that often."

"Oh, okay," Giselle said. This was rapidly spiraling out of control. Why had he bothered to open his stupid mouth in the first place?

Seeking to change the subject, Harry asked something else he probably didn't have any right to ask. "Giselle, why are you in Slytherin House? What do you think made the hat choose this for you; if I recall, it happened pretty damn quickly."

"I know I may look like a nervous wreck that will never amount to anything, but that's exactly what I don't want to happen. I don't want to be anonymous, I don't want to be an unknown. I want to make something of myself. Dad...our family really isn't that historic or important. The whole family traditions thing...it's just an act, a ruse to keep my father's self-esteem up. Since Mum left him, just ran off, he's been desperate to find something, anything to be proud of. I'm it."

Harry smiled. "You aren't alone in that. A lot of Slytherins, and even some that aren't, have these massive legacies to live up to, real or imagined."

"No, no, you don't get it," Giselle insisted, her eyes shining brightly. "I don't want to live up to a legacy. I want to make a legacy." Her expression fell. "Of course, at the rate I'm going, average in everything, I don't suppose there's much chance of that."

"You can surprise yourself sometimes, with what you are capable of. And what you aren't."

"Easy for you to talk. You, taking those Crucios in the graveyard like it was nothing. Watching your friend executed. And your arm getting ripped up, and you still got up and fought-"

"I...you don't understand what that was like...it wasn't..."

Suddenly, something occurred to him. "Wait, how did you know about the-"

A massive explosion rocked the store, shattering the windows and sending merchandise flying off the shelves. Screams were heard, and more explosions. "What in the name of the inferno was that?" Harry asked, surprising himself by using one of Daphne's old euphemisms.

"I don't know," Giselle said, picking herself up. Suddenly she looked different, more composed...more than should have been possible. There was an intensity, a focus, a confidence...She blinked, and just like that, it was gone. Harry had no time to figure it out. He grabbed her hand and hauled her out of the store, drawing his wand and scanning the street for threats. He saw columns of smoke rising all over Hogsmeade, screams of the terrified and the enraged, hideous laughter...

Hogsmeade was under attack.

"Come on!" he yelled to Giselle. "We need to find some..." He looked back. She was gone, vanished into thin air. He hadn't even

noticed that he wasn't holding her hand until that moment. "Giselle!" he yelled. "Giselle!"

No one answered but more explosions, more screams. He had to hope she could fend for herself.

Harry moved into the street, trying to ascertain exactly what was going on. All he could see was chaos. What should he do? Should he run for safety, protect himself at all costs? Should he try to help? Should he try to fight? He knew what Hermione, and indeed, Snape's answer would be. But he couldn't run. Not this time.

You are being an idiot, Potter. A glory-seeking Gryfindor-esque idiot! He hesitated. At the next moment, spotting the nearest column of smoke, he ran headlong into the action.

Albus Dumbledore watched the columns of smoke rising from Hogsmeade, shock paralyzing him momentarily. As he pondered what he might do, the door to his office was thrown open. Severus Snape stood there, looking as terrified as Albus had ever seen the man. In an instant, the older wizard knew what had happened, why, and what his Potions Master was going to say. "You knew."

Snape nodded. "I'm sorry, Albus. I wrestled with this decision. But I had no choice. This is the best that I could do."

Albus closed his eyes. "Tell me what you know, at this instant." His voice was firm and angry, though the anger was not directed at the man before him.

Severus complied.

Three Third Years hurried by, one of them supported by a pair of friends, blood covering his robes from what looked like a leg wound. Harry let them go; they were Hufflepuffs he didn't recognize. Their faces were masks of abject terror and confusion. None of them had been prepared for this. Harry silently cursed Fudge and Umbridge, and moved on.

The attacking forces had spread out, setting more fires, destroying more homes and businesses. Harry had seen remarkably few bodies, and, thank Merlin, none of them had been students. He suspected that the Dark Lord wanted to avoid killing the heirs of prominent families, and had ordered his men to be careful around people wearing Hogwarts robes. Still, he'd be shocked if they all made it out alive. Soldiers had a tendency to forget orders when the curses started flying.

More students hurried past, ignoring a wounded elderly man crying out for help. His leg had been broken by falling roof tiles, probably dislodged when the first explosions hit. Harry wanted to help him, but knew he didn't have the time. He pressed on, spinning round corners to check if there was anyone coming. He nearly killed Madam Rosmerta when she popped out from behind a door, streaks of blood on her dress. He yanked his wand upward. She gave him a look, and ran past.

Potter, what are you doing? His mind thundered. Was it Kalas? Maybe, but Harry was never terribly surprised to hear more than one different voice in his head. You are going to get yourself killed, running into a battle you had every chance to escape...

Finally, emerging into a mostly deserted street, he ran into a student he recognized. Ron Weasley yelled for Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnegan to hurry up, looking back the way they'd come. He looked terrified, and yet horribly guilty. "Come on you fools!" he screamed, nearly hysterical. As he turned back, he saw Harry. Relief, of all things, showed on his face. "Thank Merlin. Dean, go! Potter, over here, now, please!"

Harry hustled over. "What's going on, Ron?"

Ron swallowed, tried to say something, and then shook his head. Tears were in his eyes. "Her...Hermione."

Harry's blood froze in his veins. "Hermione? Hermione what? Ron, answer me!"

“She’s back there...tried to fight, I don’t know what happened, she and a couple of others...I think they made it out...I couldn’t...” he broke down again. “I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry.”

“Pull yourself together, Ronald Weasley!” Harry bellowed.

Ron stopped blubbering. “Good. Now tell me these things: where is Hermione, what condition was she in when you last saw her, and what do you think her condition is at this moment. Come on!”

“Okay...she’s...she’s two...three...maybe four...blocks that way,” he said, pointing south. “Oh Merlin, Potter, they were everywhere. I’m supposed to be a Gryffindor, I’m supposed to be brave. But I couldn’t...I just ran, I saw Hermione lying there, and I just...”

“What did you say?” Harry whispered with deadly intensity.

“She...she fell...dunno if she was hit, or just lost her balance. It was chaos, Potter, people screaming, and Dean was trying to get me out of there. Some courageous heroes we are.”

“Well, Ron, the good news is, you aren’t dead courageous heroes.”

“Ron!” Seamus yelled. “Are you coming or what?”

“Go on without me!”

“Are you mad!”

“Just go!” The Gryffindor looked back one more time, and then disappeared down the alley.”

Harry looked Ron right in the eyes. “What in Merlin’s name do you think you are doing?”

“I’m...I’m not leaving her...I’m going to help you rescue her...”

“Ron, this isn’t a game! This isn’t some fantasy where you can ride in and rescue the damsel in distress! This is real! Those curses are real!” Harry couldn’t believe he was arguing this, and was realizing he really didn’t have time.

“I’m going!”

Harry didn’t have time to talk him out of it. “What about Ginny?”

“Huh?”

“Have you seen her? Or Neville? Or Luna?”

“No...yeah, yeah, I did. I saw her...well I think I did. She was running. Can’t miss that red hair, though.”

Harry breathed a sigh of relief. “Alright, Weasley, time to be a hero. Watch me. Don’t do anything stupid, like I’m sure you want to. I’m not getting you killed too.”

“I won’t,” Ron said, uncharacteristically ignoring the slight. There was fire in the Gryffindor’s eyes. He was ready, whatever the hell that meant.

“Let’s go!”

It had been a long time since Aiden Greengrass had been in the heat of battle. And damned if he didn’t miss it. He blasted one juvenile Death Eater that couldn’t have been more than twenty into a wall, knocking him out. He pivoted and ducked, dodging one hex and then deflecting another weak attempt to bring him down. A Blinding Curse took care of one, a Crucio quickly brought down the other.

Children, Aiden thought to himself. The Dark Lord has sent children to do his dirty work. No match for any trained foe, but then, he turned them loose on a town of storekeepers and students, hadn’t he?

A pair of Stunners put both of his remaining adversaries out of the fight, ceasing the screams of both. Aiden usually didn’t hesitate to kill

Death Eaters. But these boys were not Death Eaters. They were cannon fodder, meat shields, expendable troops. These were probably some of the more inept of the lot. They'd been looting some abandoned stores when Aiden had discovered them, Apparating into their midst.

Checking that the first was indeed unconscious, Aiden looked around. He saw the flash of magic being used, heard explosions. He confirmed his initial suspicion. Yes, the first place he'd seen was more active than the rest. That's probably where he'd find Harry, then. Either the young man had decided to play hero...and Aiden considered that partially his own fault, setting such an ultimatum that Harry prove himself worthy of the attention Aiden paid him. Aiden was not just here to protect an investment. He was here to protect someone that had grown increasingly important to him.

He emerged into the next square. Four bodies, several fire, and scorch marks marked this as a former hot zone. Two were clearly dead, two might be alive. He suddenly saw a very tall figure next to one of them. It was Albus Dumbledore. They locked eyes.

"We have to hurry," Aiden told him. "Harry is their primary target. All the rest is just a distraction. There's fighting taking place north of here. I'm pretty sure that's him."

Albus nodded. "A strange day it is, Aiden. You've come home."

"Maybe I have," the former Gryffindor whispered. "But I've come for a reason."

"And I as well. The rest of the Faculty is managing the evacuation. The Aurors are coming, but they are being delayed. I'm sure you know by who." There was a look of rage in the old wizard's face that was rarely seen.

A scream split the air. It sounded like a student, though not Harry. Of course, as young as they were, it could be a Death Eater.

Dumbledore gestured, and ran. Aiden followed.

“Oh hell!” Ron whispered. Harry shushed him, studying the situation. They’d ended up next to Zonko’s, which looked a little worse for the wear.

“That looks like her, right next to the door. Wonder what she was doing there.”

“Don’t mind that, what are we going to do?”

“I’m trying to think of something.”

“Think of something? How complicated can it be?”

Harry silenced him with a glare. “Alright, I see four of them, mingling around, talking, waiting for the rest of their lot to get back, maybe. This is a bad angle, so I’m going to assume there are others we can’t see.”

“Way to be pessimistic.”

“Shut up.”

Hermione’s was not the only body splayed on the ground. The man Harry suspected was Zonko himself was sprawled next to the fountain, his stomach a red ruin. A middle-aged witch was also clearly dead, her wand drawn, as she’d tried in vain to fight the Death Eaters. Her eyes were open. Killing Curse, then, Harry decided. These weren’t all green recruits, or, at least, they were dangerous green recruits. He’d already brought down two looting Death Eaters, a young woman and an older man. He’d gotten the latter in the back with a Stunner, but the former had put up a fight. Ron and Harry had worked together to bring her down. Ginny’s youngest brother was annoying as hell, but he wasn’t entirely helpless with a wand. He noticed what might have been a student hidden in the shadows to an alleyway. The felled girl appeared to be a Ravenclaw, maybe, maybe Lisa Turpin, although he couldn’t even tell if she had blue trim or not. Might have been red.

Two of the Death Eaters started to move forward. They kicked Zonko, and his body fell over. One of them laughed heartlessly. Then he moved toward Hermione, and Harry had a feeling of terrible foreboding. He kicked her, and she groaned, coughing. "Hey, Franz, this one's alive!" he called back to one of the others. He laughed. "Looks like a pretty one. Come help me with her!"

Harry's stomach roiled in revulsion as the Death Eater kicked up the bottom of Hermione's robes with his boot, his other hand reaching for his belt. Not on your life... "Ron," he whispered...too late.

"Stupefy!" the Gryffindor cried as he flew around the corner. His spell flew wide, missing the target by four feet. He did succeed in gaining the attention of the rest, who drew their wands and quickly retaliated, sending deadly curses their way. One flew down the alley Harry was hiding in, a Slicing Curse that nicked his right leg.

Ron sensibly dove for cover, letting loose a pair of Stunning Spells that that nearly hit the one standing over Hermione, who had now dropped to a crouch next to her still form. Harry moved out, firing a barrage of curses, one of which hit Hermione's attacker in the center of mass, sending him sprawling, blood flying from a major chest wound. At that moment, his danger sense flared, and he ducked as a hail of literally a dozen curses flew over his head, ripping up walls of the house behind him. Where did those come from?

He blasted three curses as suppressing fire, then spared a quick glance. Fuck. Fuck, Fuck, FUCK! he cursed. Of course, of course they would do this. It was much too perfect, or rather imperfect from Harry's perspective. They'd followed him, they must have. They knew that Harry wouldn't be able to stay hidden if his friend were about to be assaulted. And some of them would have recognized Hermione; surely his inner circle of friends were known to Voldemort at this point. She made the perfect bait...and he'd just walked right into a trap. Death Eater lined the rooftops, maybe a score of them in total. He thought he recognized Rabastan LeStrange, but a second barrage prevented him from confirming that.

The curses now being thrown his way indicated that they weren't looking to take him alive. A Killing Curse roared past, blasting a hole

in the cobblestone street. He rolled, grabbing Ron, who appeared to have been hit, and hurling him behind the fountain, into a relatively safe position. This seemed to wake him up, and as Harry obliterated the balcony position of two of his enemies with a massive Demolition Curse, he staggered to his feet. By some sheer dumb luck, he managed to wing one with what might have been a Cutting Charm. Little Ronnie had drawn his first blood. An explosion from a near miss sent the Gryffindor sprawling. He cried out in pain.

Harry kept moving, kept firing, aiming more by instinct than any sensory input. He heard groans and yells that indicated that maybe he'd gotten lucky. Actually, he heard a lot of them. More than was possible...what?

A blur of motion in the corner of his eyes caught his attention – someone was trying to sneak up behind him. He spun round, a curse on his lips...and found his wand practically up the nose of Aiden Greengrass. Behind him was Albus Dumbledore. He spared a glance around...Death Eaters lay sprawled in heaps all over the place. Aiden abruptly raised his wand. Harry looked to see Rabastan Lestrage, bleeding from his left arm, standing on the roof of Zonko's. He reached for a pendant around his neck, and grasped it just as a Killing Curse from Aiden bore down on him. He vanished, along with the rest of the downed Death Eaters. The green bolt flew harmlessly into the sky.

"Linked portkeys," Aiden growled. "Wouldn't want to be leaving prisoners to interrogate. I suspect the rest have gone as well. The live ones, at least. The dead were probably left behind."

"Professor...Aiden," Harry breathed. "Thank you."

"You seemed to be doing a fair job yourself," Aiden remarked with some admiration, pointing to the massive smoking crater that had once been the balcony of someone's home.

"I don't think I could have kept it up for long," Harry admitted. "They had me trapped like a fish in a barrel." He shook his head, trying to clear it as he tried to calm his body, which was saturated with

adrenaline. "The others," he sent, indicating the bodies before them. Dumbledore checked on Ron, who groaned, indicating his presence among the living. Harry dashed to Hermione's side. Her eyes opened as he knelt next to her.

"Boy am I glad to see you," she said softly.

"Me too," Harry replied, trying not to think of what had very nearly happened to her. Yes, the situation had been staged. But the lust of that Death Eater? That was very real. He hoped she'd never find out about it. He'd need to talk to Ron to make sure. She didn't need to know.

"Is everyone okay?"

Harry sighed. "I don't know. Dumbledore's here. And Aiden. The Death Eater have gone."

"Oh, good," she said, sounding distracted and confused. Harry saw that her eyes weren't really focusing on him. She probably had a concussion. The parts of her hair on the right side of her head was matted with blood. But she was alive.

"Lisa!" Hermione suddenly cried. "Where is she? What happened to her?"

"I'm okay, Hermione," the girl cried back, staggering forwards. She also looked to be woozy. She gave a brief smile, and then dropped to her knees and vomited. Aiden grasped her shoulder, steadying her.

Another form raced into view, emerging from the same alley that Harry had taken. It was Snape.

Harry saw his eyes. And instantly, he knew.

"You knew this was going to happen. You knew, and you did nothing." Harry squeezed Hermione's hand, and rose angrily.

"I did, Potter. I had a choice to make. And I made it."

“And people died because of it! Hermione was nearly...” he caught himself.

“This was about you, Potter. It was all about you.” Snape sounded desperate, pathetic even. But his words hit home. This had happened because he had been here.

Harry closed his eyes. He heard more movement, and Giselle suddenly appeared, dashing up the road. “Harry? Harry! Are you alright?”

She ran up to him and hugged him. Hermione looked baffled.

“I’m fine, Giselle. Are you alright? You disappeared...”

“I thought I saw a friend of mine, and I wanted to see if she was okay. I got knocked over and then just decided to hide. I couldn’t see you.”

“It’s okay,” Harry said, squeezing her back. Her let her go. Over her shoulder, he could see Hermione’s mouth open in astonishment. Later, he mouthed.

“Harry...oh Harry, you’re bleeding!” Giselle’s sleeves were red. Harry looked at his right shoulder. A deep gash was bleeding rather badly. He felt nothing.

“So I am,” he said lifelessly. Harry hung his head, as Hogsmeade continued to burn around him.

A/N: Unlike a number of chapters I’ve written up in the past, which were chock full of personal introspection (some would say endless) and conversations between characters that might occasionally actually advance the plot, a lot actually happened in this one. Voldemort has fired the opening salvo of the Second Great Wizarding War, or whatever the historians dub it appropriate to be called.

I suppose one of the more central questions to be asked is this: who exactly is Giselle Reisor? Bearing in mind that I don't terribly regret the way I portrayed her in DR, I suspect you'll find that answer quite complicated. So to pre-empt any claims that I've written her out of character, bear in mind that exactly what her character is wasn't really disclosed in the brief glimpses we've seen of her before. I'll leave it at that.

I realize that the first scene (which seemed oddly important to me) has the potential to rile up those H/G shippers reading this and raise the hopes of those not so fond of that particular pairing. I'm not exactly willing to give away the future of that relationship, in part because in my mind it still has numerous directions to go. This was never intended to be, and never will be, a story of romance. Romance is merely a facet of human behavior playing out against the backdrop of the war.

A somewhat unintended subtext to this chapter is that it represents in some way the redemption of Gryffindor, which up to this point hasn't really represented itself all that well. Both Aiden and more importantly Ron make important and principled decisions to risk their own lives for those of another. That theme will carry over to the next chapter. I've been looking for a good opportunity to make GM Ron an acceptable human being again, and this seemed like a great scenario.

I'm not sure how far this installment has to go, but I don't really see myself writing more than 5-6 more chapters. It will probably end up shorter than DR. Nothing terribly wrong with that, in my mind, if I get the story to where I want it to go.

Sneak preview of next chapter:

"Harry checked if the door was locked. It wasn't. He pulled the handle. Greengrass kicked the door in for good measure. It slammed into the opposite wall, startling Dolores Umbridge quite badly. "What is the meaning of this?" she demanded. Her eyes locked on Harry, burning with hatred.

Harry met her intense gaze without flinching. "I'm afraid that you are to step down from your position at Hogwarts. Effective immediately.

“I will do no such thing! You insolent rats! I’ll have you expelled, all of you!”

“You won’t have that power for very much longer,” Daphne said, her voice ice cold. She drew her wand with a flourish, aiming it straight at the larger woman’s heart. “Surrender.”

“You wouldn’t dare...you...you can’t...you wouldn’t dare harm me!” she shrieked.”

Hehe.

Chapter 15: Turning Point

“Hold still, Mr. Potter, or you will be here for much longer than you’d like,” Madam Pomfrey chided him. Harry winced as she cleaned off his various wounds, though by far the most serious was the shoulder injury that Giselle had spotted earlier. She was worked on that one now, using some foul-smelling purple liquid to clean out the wound before she would seal in with a Healing Spell. It burned and hissed when it made contact with the gash.

“Ow,” Harry complained, trying to hold still.

“It’s a deep wound, Mr. Potter, and because you were sitting around for so long it’s likely to be infected by now. Actually, I’m sure it is. There are pieces of debris lodged in it, and that’s what I’m trying to eradicate. You won’t like the consequences if I seal the wound now.”

“I know, I know. Just...go ahead.”

Madam Pomfrey gave him a skeptical look, and dabbed more purple liquid onto his shoulder. “Alright, that should do it. You’re lucky, Potter. This gash nearly made it all the way to the bone. All the ligaments and tendons seem to be intact. Rotator cuff looks to be fine. All in all, I’d say this was one of the less severe injuries I’ve ever treated on you.”

She waved her wand, and Harry felt his shoulder burn momentarily as skin and muscle were knitted back together. “There we go. Your leg wound is just a scratch, no need to worry about it. You’re intact Potter. Feel free to go out and damage yourself some more.”

“Thanks, Madam Pomfrey,” Harry said, hopping off the bed. He flexed his right shoulder. It was stiff, but nothing to be terribly concerned about. Poppy Pomfrey was a very capable Mediwitch.

Harry looked around the overcrowded Hospital Wing. Some of the beds were occupied by students, including Hermione, Lisa, and Ron, who’d suffered some minor injuries from being tossed around a bit, but had emerged mostly unscathed. A number of Hogsmeade

residents were also being treated here. The more severe cases, and there were a few, had been evacuated to St. Mungo's. He made his way to his friend's bedside. She was staring at him, eyes unfocused, sitting up with her back against the headboard of the bed. Because she was clearly concussed, Madam Pomfrey wasn't going to take any chances that she might fall asleep, which might send her into a coma. As good as magic was at healing flesh wounds, neurological damage was much more complex, and it was the near-unanimous opinion of the Wizarding world's medical professionals that nothing did a better job of healing brain injuries than the body of the person involved. He waved as he approached. Lisa was also wide-awake and looking at him strangely. She waved back, perhaps thinking that the gesture was meant for her. "Hey Harry. How are you?" He moved toward her bed, dropping into a chair next to it.

"Been better, but seem to have made it out in one piece. How are you feeling?"

"Like I was run over by a lorry."

Harry gave her a sympathetic look. "I'm sorry you had to get dragged into all of this."

The Ravenclaw shrugged. "Potter, there's no use blaming yourself. You did your best, and you got Hermione and me out alive."

Harry bit his lip, not saying a number of the things that were pounding through his brain. They wouldn't have been there if it were not for me. Do you remember being knocked out near Zonkos? You weren't, you were dumped there as part of a deliberate trap for yours truly. That's twice I've nearly gotten you killed, how can you be so charitable to me.

Lisa, always quite sharp, seemed to sense what he was thinking. "Harry, I know that you are trying to take responsibility for this, and I don't know the whole story, but the reason those people are trying to kill you is because you are the only one that can stop the Darkness. You are our hero, even if you've got a ways to go before you feel like

one. And...and if I die fighting by your side, I'll have died an honorable and worthy death, at least."

Harry was floored by her proclamation. "Well, thank Merlin it wasn't this time," was all he could come up with. "That...that means a lot to me, Lisa. With our history and all..."

"Don't go there," the Ravenclaw snapped. "Just don't. That wasn't you."

Harry nodded. "Okay. Thank you."

"You're welcome. Potter, you saved my life today."

"I also got you into a life-threatening situation in the first place."

"No, I did that. I could have run, but Hermione wanted to keep some of the younger students safe and I stayed behind, shooting off pathetic little hexes as if I really knew what I was doing. Some Ravenclaw I am."

"Hey, one thing I've learned over and over is that the whole House thing isn't as clear cut as you might imagine. We all have aspects of each house, because they all represent qualities in every human being."

Lisa blinked. "Did you hear that somewhere or did you pull that out of your arse?"

"The latter," Harry said, grinning.

"Well, it sounded damn good, Potter. I guess my Gryffindor side got a workout today."

"Maybe Hufflepuff as well. You stayed with Hermione."

"I suppose that's true." She looked at him. "We...as in the Ravenclaws, haven't seen much of you in quite a while, Harry. Any particular reason for that?"

“My life has rapidly spun out of control?” Harry offered. “I’ll...I’ll try to make more of an effort. I ought to be able to find you in the Library on weekends, no?”

“Certainly. We’ve got a veritable party going on most Sunday evenings. Terry, Padma, Mandy, Michael...both of them, actually. We might be bookish, Potter, but that doesn’t mean we don’t procrastinate like mad.” She smiled. “We just waste our time in other scholarly pursuits.”

“I’m sure.”

“Oh, yes, don’t doubt me. Last weekend I stayed up until 4 o’clock Monday writing a Potions essay because I’d spent the lionshare of the weekend reading up on an archeological excavation of a wizard’s stronghold in Wales from the 1st century A.D. Interesting connection between Celtic druidism and modern magical practice, though equally surprising was the amount that was just Muggle superstition. At least, according to a few of the authors I read. A couple of them swear by tree spirits.”

Harry marveled at her. “I think you just provided a textbook example of completely useless information.”

Lisa grinned. “It was fun. Some of the sources are damn near unintelligible. Had to get some help from a 7th year who specializes in Ancient Runes. Even then, half of it didn’t make sense. Just made the rest of it that much more exciting.”

“You’re mad.”

“I’m a Ravenclaw, Potter, and damn proud of it. Lifelong collectors of the obscure and the arcane, that’s us.”

“In all seriousness though, I will try to drop by sometimes. I think...I think I could use a break from everything, hang out with some friends just for the heck of it, you know.”

“You’re more than welcome. But remember, we are Ravenclaws. We love fun, but we’re not hanging out in the Library for the heck of it. Common Room is much more comfortable, just a tad noisy.”

“Even you?”

“Oh yeah. You’d think that the studious house would have a neat, orderly, peaceful setup, don’t you? Not so much. The firsties are mostly to blame, but it’s sort of a little tradition to let them have their way. I mean, few of them are initially able to really deal with the kind of work you need to put in to be a real Ravenclaw. They need time to unwind, chase each other about with pillows, that sort of thing. Who knows? The next person you brain might turn into your best friend. That’s how I got to know Terry so well, once I’d helped him off the ground.”

Harry shook his head in amazement. He glanced back at Hermione, but her eyes were closed and she’d turned away from him. He hoped it wasn’t anything he’d done. He would have a good talk with her once he was able. “I should be moving along. It was nice to talk to you, Lisa. Hope the next time I see you isn’t so...traumatic.”

“Sounds fantastic to me...and Harry, what I said before...I meant it. Really. I don’t know why it came out, or why I phrased it as I did, but I meant every word. One thing today made me realize is that as a Muggleborn witch I’ve got a big target on my back. I don’t...I don’t mean to put even more pressure on you. Actually, I want to do the opposite. You have friends in Ravenclaw. Maybe we doubted you at first, and some of us have said very unfair things in the past. But we’re nothing if not constantly thinking, Potter, and it’s our general conclusion: you are a fine bloke who sometimes makes mistakes but it still deserving of our support. Everything happens to you, Harry. That cannot be an accident.”

“I wish it were,” he whispered. “Thanks. I’ll try to see you soon. Thank the others...for having faith in me, I suppose.”

“There are some that really are not fond of you, Harry, just so you know. Morag McDougal basically decided you were a narcissistic

danger to all during your Second Year, he hasn't changed his opinion."

"Honestly, Lisa," Harry said, reflecting back on his eventful and controversial Hogwarts career, "that's sort of to be expected at this point." He noticed a blotch of red hair a couple beds down. "I've got to go. Rest up, and I'll see you soon."

"Sure thing, Harry. Oh, could you get the book out of my purse?"

Harry did so, taking a gander at it as he handed it to her, "1001 Scarcely Known Facts about Medieval Wizarding England," he read. "You are such a nerd."

"Why thank you, Mr. Potter. That's quite a compliment." Lisa busied herself with her reading, and Harry moved on. Ron was awake, rolling around and staring at the ceiling. He rolled to face him as he approached.

"Oh boy. Come to chew me out for being an idiot, then?"

Harry laughed mirthlessly and shook his head. "What you did out there was pretty damn brave. Stupid, yes, but brave. You are lucky to be alive."

"Don't I know it," Ron muttered. "You were...you were pretty damn impressive out there, Potter. I didn't think you had a chance."

"I didn't," Harry said firmly. "I got lucky, and managed not to get myself killed making a truly elementary tactical mistake. We're alive because they were stupid and failed to watch for new threats, focusing, obsessing even, on me. They aren't always going to make that mistake."

"Damn, Pot...Harry," Ron said, trying the name out. "Don't you think you're being a bit hard on yourself? I mean, weren't they gunning for you? Don't you think this would have happened one way or the other? You saved Hermione from something truly awful. That's courage, Harry. That's an accomplishment. Me...I just threw myself

into that mess, into water way over my head. I guess I'm just impulsive like that...when it feels like the right thing to do, I just do it, damn the odds."

Harry looked away. "Hermione wouldn't have been in that situation if it wasn't for me."

Ron scoffed. "Really, you are going to go with that defense? How about the Turpin girl? Who knows what those bastards might have done to her. She's not that close to you. I mean, three years ago, you petrif...oh, sorry..." Ron had stopped, presumably because he'd seen the look of abject guilt that had fallen, unbidden, upon Harry's features. "Damn, that was insensitive."

Harry smiled despite the anguish he felt. "A bit."

"Yeah..." the redhead ran a hand through his hair. "You know, I never did...well, forgive you for that...I mean, I did, but I never said as such, you know."

Harry eyed him curiously. "I heard from Hermione you were rather furious. I believe you kept going even after Snape threatened to skin you alive."

"I was stupid. And angry. And scared. I said a lot of things, did a lot of things, to you, to Ginny, to Hermione, that were just wrong. I may not really like you, Harry. You seem well on your way to being a Dark wizard, and I don't like that one bit. And you are a Slytherin, and a pretty nasty one at that. But what happened to you that year wasn't your fault. I...I guess I'll just come out and say it...I forgive you, Harry. And I'm sorry for all the hell I've put you and your friends through all these years. I was an idiot."

Harry blinked. "Ron...I really appreciate this...but why now? What's changed? I want to believe you, want to trust that you've grown up a bit...but why the change of heart, and why haven't you told me until now."

“ Because I saw you, Harry.” Ron’s eyes were wide with astonishment. “I saw Harry Bloody Potter run into the middle of a war zone to try to help people, drag along a useless idiot like me, and then I saw him hold off a score of Death Eaters without receiving a scratch. I don’t care if you think it was nothing but luck,” he said, responding to Harry’s shaking head. “What I saw out there, along with some of what Bill’s been saying to me all these years, just made me realize that I’d been wrong from the start. What you did today was worthy of the best Gryffindor has to offer. Maybe that’s an insult for you lot, but it’s the highest praise you can get from me.”

Harry was speechless. “I...I don’t really know how to respond to that. Thank you for believing in me. Don’t...don’t think too much of what you saw today, though. I did get lucky, and there was a whole lot of me that wanted to run for safety.”

“But you didn’t,” Ron insisted. “You went back. You didn’t even know that Hermione was in danger, not until I told you.”

Harry smiled bitterly. “Perhaps I went back more out of a desire to prove myself more than genuine courage.”

Ron shrugged. “Maybe. I don’t think so.” He reached his hand out. “I’ve got your back, Harry, if you’ll have me.”

Harry hesitated. Ronald Wesley had helped make his First Year a living hell, and hadn’t really improved from there so much as Harry had been able to reduce the impact of Ron’s callous and malicious behavior. But when he looked into the boy’s eyes, he saw nothing but regret and honesty, and a determination that this would be the end of their antagonistic relationship. Harry took his hand, squeezing hard. “I’ll have you, Weasley, though I haven’t the slightest clue why.”

Ron smiled. “Well, I guess it’s up to me to prove you made the right choice.”

“I want to believe that, Ron. I’ll give you a chance, because having you as my enemy is damned inconvenient, and well, maybe Ginny could use some good news of reconciliation between us. She’s been

looking for a reason for years now; she hates being your enemy. I just...I don't know if she'll be so willing to forgive me. I'm not family."

"I know. And, Harry...look, I don't know what happened with you two...I probably don't want to know everything. But I think that you care about her, and you would never mean to hurt her. So...I'll reserve judgment on that, okay? I'll leave it to my sister to figure out what should happen."

Harry was appalled by Ron's maturity, and sought to remedy the situation with juvenile teasing. "Your mother must be so proud...Ickle Ronniekins is all growed up."

Ron swatted at him. "Hey! You are not allowed to call me that."

"Try and stop me," Harry dared. They were arguing, but for the first time it was just playful banter. "I'll see you around, Ronniekins."

"You too, Harrikins."

Harry turned. "Is that the best you can come up with?"

"Give me some time."

Harry wandered down the corridor, headed for the Room of Requirement. He wasn't sure exactly what he wanted of the magic there just yet, but a break from the bustling chaos around him would be greatly appreciated. It was Valentine's Day, a day he'd been looking forward to for the first part of the term, and dreading for the rest. He needed a chance to think, to contemplate, to talk himself off the proverbial edge with the unmatched power of reason. He'd always been good at that. He had to be, really. Of course, as this was Harry, things didn't go quite as planned.

The Room was occupied. That could mean a number of things. There were only a small number of people who knew about it, and even fewer that knew how to get in. Hermione was in Hospital Wing, Ginny never came except for DA meetings, Neville rarely came without Hermione...he considered the possibility it was one of the older

generation...Remus...Sirius...Daphne? He wasn't sure he was in any state to confront the latter. And he had to confront her. What had happened with Ginny had demonstrated, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that Harry's judgment had been badly compromised by his relationship and history with his guardian. Normally, he supposed, that wouldn't be anything remarkable or objectionable, merely being a side effect of a strong mother-son bond. But neither Harry nor Daphne was normal, and the consequences of Daphne's actions...and Harry's – especially the ones he had yet to make – were much more far-reaching than usual.

Now there's a understatement.

It was very much possible for someone in the Room to prevent anyone outside the Room from entering. Indeed, Harry had recently managed to keep the door locked for certain people and open for others, quite useful in clandestine meetings like the ones held weekly here, the time chosen quite literally at random. In this case, however, the door was practically beckoning to him to open it. That was very odd. When he opened the door and saw the occupants, it didn't seem nearly as bizarre.

"Hello Harry James Potter," Luna Lovegood said brightly. Harry's eyes were first drawn to the truly garish robe she was wearing. It was as if she'd picked ever single color clash imaginable, somehow formed that idea into a spell, and blasted at her school robes until she had an outfit that could make eyes bleed. Rather typical Luna, really.

"Now that isn't fair," Harry replied calmly. His eyes widened a bit when he saw the other occupant, hunched uncomfortably on a worn brown couch, a steaming cup of tea in front of him.

"Why not?"

"I don't know your middle name, Luna Lovegood."

"Apples."

Harry raised an eyebrow. That was strange, even by Luna's standards. Then again, he'd never met her parents. "Really?"

"No, but it would be a nice middle name to have."

"Sounds more like a nickname."

"Hmmm...perhaps so. I know! Call me Fraggletoes."

"Luna Fraggletoes Lovegood?" Harry grinned. "It's got a bit of a ring to it, doesn't it?"

"I rather think so," Luna said, completely serious. She blinked. "You weren't expecting us."

"No, I can't say I was."

"Well, we weren't expecting you, so I suppose that makes us even...assuming, of course, you are you. Tullybats are about. Can't be too careful."

"Suppose not. Well, to the best of my knowledge, I am who I say I am."

"Well, given that you don't really know who you are, that's hardly true," she replied cryptically. "But that's proof enough."

Luna's logic didn't really follow there, but he let it go. "Hello Peter," he said to the boy on the couch.

"Harry," he replied cautiously, taking a sip of his tea.

"I see you've kept up with Luna. Sorry I haven't been around much." As if on cue, Luna sat down next to him, staring back at Harry with bright and inquisitive eyes.

"Saving the world must take up a fair bit of time."

“It can, yeah. Are things going any better for you?”

“I’ve gone from being tormented to being ignored and hissed at from a distance. I suppose it’s an improvement.”

Harry sighed. “You’ve got some nasty ones in your year, mate. Sorry about that...have you been practicing?”

Peter hesitated. Harry sensed his anxiety. “It’s alright,” he told the younger boy softly. “You just have to understand that what you can do is pretty incredible. I’ve found that I can move object too, but with all the grace and precision of a sledgehammer. I can brute force a whole lot of things, telekinesis included. But I can’t do what you do.”

“Do you even know how I do it?”

Harry shook his head. “I’d love to learn.”

“Don’t think you can,” Peter replied simply. “It’s...it’s something I just don’t think you can do. I don’t mean to be insulting or anything it’s just...Harry, you look at the world and more often than not, you see a whole lot more than what’s directly in front of you. You are always thinking about the bigger situation, the things that are happening where you aren’t.”

“He’s right, mostly,” Luna said. “It isn’t your place.”

“I’m not sure I understand,” Harry said.

“Why would you? I haven’t really told you anything!” Peter exclaimed. He was clearly a bit agitated. Well, he was always agitated, but this seemed a little more acute than normal.

“What do you see, then?”

“I see everything, Harry...just not the same way. I see...it’s like when I close my eyes and really focus, I can see what everything is made of. Just little spots, atoms, particles.”

“That’s...interesting,” Harry admitted. “How does that play into your abilities?”

“Luna was trying to help me figure that out,” he admitted. He frowned, looking at Luna. “I didn’t really understand some of your analogies. Probably because you were talking about animals and creatures that don’t exist.”

“They exist...” Luna insisted. Her voice wasn’t angry or offended. She was merely stating a fact, one that she was happy to believe (or at least pretend she did,) even if no one else was.

“Peter, you’re hardly alone in that,” Harry said, deliberately ignoring Luna. He was impressed by how much the boy was opening up. He also looked considerably less like a street rat. “You do seem to be looking a lot better.”

“Ginny’s been taking care of me, making sure that I eat, sleep, threatening to hex Lysetta...she’s been sort of like my Mum...well, not my Mum, but...you know what I mean. And Anne sort of flattened Hazel.” He grinned. “They’ve left me alone since then.”

It felt very, very strange to Harry that he was only learning about this now, but given that he and Ginny didn’t actually talk anymore, should that really be surprising? Her actions weren’t; Ginny had become a bona-fide Slytherin, but one that never checked her compassion at the door. She was still Ginny Weasley, whatever House she was in. That multifaceted nature had been, Harry mused, one of the reasons he’d liked her so much...

“She talks about you sometimes, you know.”

Harry shook himself out of his musings and tried to keep his composure. It had been a while since he’d really thought about Ginny - more specifically, how much he really did miss her. “Does she?”

“Yeah,” Peter said. Harry waited for more, but it wasn’t forthcoming. Refusing to allow himself to appear desperate, he tried to push away the anxiety and sorrow he was feeling.

“It doesn’t really help, does it?” Luna asked.

“Not really, no.”

Peter frowned, and then seemed to come to a realization. “So she does that to you as well?”

“There’s nothing wrong with it,” Luna insisted.

“You get used to it eventually,” said Harry. “It’s just...a different way of communicating.”

“Except you don’t really know if communication is taking place.”

“Well, yes, it has its flaws, but I suppose I just imagine that Luna could be in my mind at any moment.”

Peter stared. “And you still trust her? You aren’t frightened of her? You, of all people, would seem to have secrets that no one should know.”

“I trust Luna with my life. More than that, actually. I trust her with my mind. My sanity. You see, during my Second Year, I suffered significant psychological and mental trauma. My mind was shattered, and I really didn’t have the ability to put it completely back together again. Luna had me fixed in under five minutes.”

“What else was a friend to do?” she asked, obviously having no idea how absurd it sounded.

“Oh. Wow.”

“I want to be a friend to everyone. But they are more interested in playing games. I don’t really like most of those games,” Luna said softly.

“Well, I’m your friend,” Peter said, reaching out and hugging her around the shoulders. Luna smiled contentedly, leaning back into him, purring like a cat. Peter seemed a bit confused by that, but seemed to like where he was. Harry smiled a bit at that. Luna was sort of seeing Neville...actually, it wasn’t completely clear what the situation was there, except that there was mutual interest and a tremendous amount of awkwardness on Neville’s side. In any case, Luna was an odd bird. Normal rules and expectations just didn’t really apply to her.

Without warning, the door swung open, and Daphne Greengrass strode through, followed by Theodore Nott, who glanced around the room, looking rather impressed. Harry was immediately on his guard; Daphne had come to a few DA meetings, more just to see what was happening than anything else, but Nott hadn’t been here in Harry’s knowledge. And, though he acknowledged that his family ties might have quite a bit to do with it, Harry didn’t trust him, or particularly like him. His humanity seemed to come and go in a way that unnerved many around him.

Greengrass strode towards him with a purpose, stopping a couple of feet short. “I just received an owl from my father. It’s started, but Umbridge needs to be neutralized. This operation relies on total secrecy, and she has the ability to throw everything out of kilter.”

“Does Dumbledore know?”

Daphne shrugged. “I suspect so. I believe he and my father spoke in the last week, based on some of the things I’ve heard in his letters. We are not going to directly involve him in this.”

“Snape or McGonagall?”

Daphne shook her head firmly. “Alright,” Harry relented.

“Let me get this straight,” Peter said, rising from the couch. “You three are going to march into Professor Umbridge’s office and take her prisoner? Are you completely mad?”

Daphne regarded the boy with a sneer. "You must be that Mud...Muggle-born," she corrected, remembering Harry's presence, which he found rather odd. Greengrass didn't usually care about offending him. "Peter Lowry, right? I heard you have been causing trouble with the First Years."

"Believe me, it's the other way around," Harry told her. "Well...Ginny did step in at one point, but I don't really know about the details."

"I suppose you wouldn't. Sometimes I wonder if you forget your House loyalties," she snapped with a certain edge that made Harry very cross. He controlled his emotions, taking in some deep breaths.

"There is no need for this now. We have a job to do."

"So that's the plan?" Peter asked. "You'll be expelled!"

"Greater things are going on here, greater than you'll ever know, kid," she almost spat. Daphne got very nasty when she was on edge, Harry noticed. She turned back to him. "We need to move, now. It took me ages to find you. Father has already left for the Ministry. In minutes, Fudge will be removed from office. Get a move on it, Potter!"

"Just the three of us?" Harry asked. "Are you sure? Hermione would..."

"I really couldn't care less what that girl would want. She is unnecessary. We are Slytherins. Politics and manipulation is our calling. We don't need Gryffindors to get things done."

Harry's blood ran hot at the insinuations that Greengrass was making, but he knew time was of the essence, and shelved his rage. They would have a long conversation, at a later time. "I'll lead. Daphne, to the right. Nott, left."

He turned back to the couch. "Luna?"

Daphne hissed in displeasure, but said nothing. The slight girl nodded, and moved to join them. Peter was left alone. "Get back to the

dormitory. If things go wrong, I don't want you caught up in this," Harry told him. "Luna, stay behind us."

"Phalanx," Nott said with a grin.

"Head of a Serpent," Harry replied grimly.

The three Slytherins and the trailing Ravenclaw strode through the corridors of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, slicing through crowds of students like a scythe through wheat. Students almost tripped over themselves to get out of the way. Faces set in determined calculation, each running through a number of scenarios that might occur, some of which involved drawn wands. None of them terribly concerned with the Inquisitorial Squad, made up of misfits and sycophants, an embarrassingly large number of them from Slytherin. Tracey Davis had joined, to Harry's surprise and dismay, but the rest of the Serpents in his year had stayed out of it. They made a very formidable sight. One of the IS thugs, a Slytherin Second Year named Gwen Rothwell, moved toward them, her IS badge displayed proudly on her breast. Daphne Greengrass gave her one look, and she shrunk back in terror, wordlessly allowing the procession to pass. They passed teachers, who stared, some in confusion, some in shock, others in apprehension. They approached the office. Standing before it was Albus Dumbledore.

"It must be done," Daphne declared.

The old wizard looked at them over his half-moon spectacles. There was a deep sadness in those brilliant blue eyes, but his face was set in concentration. "Then I will not impede you any longer. It has already begun."

He moved aside, and Daphne began to advance, leaving the others hustling to catch up. As if on cue, the door swung open, and a trio of Inquisitorial Squad members emerged, a pair of Slytherins and an older Ravenclaw. Harry recognized Raymond Tyler from Quidditch; he played Beater for a couple of years."

"It's over. Move aside," Harry said.

“You can’t do this!” one of the Slytherins exclaimed. Youngest of the group – a First Year Harry thought. The one standing next to him definitely was.

He locked eyes with her. “Lysetta, move aside now and there will be no consequences. Fail to do so, and we will move you ourselves. Do you understand?”

“There you go, Potter. So full of yourself. You think you can attack a teacher? You aren’t long for this world, Potter. You need to learn to respect authority.”

“Speak for yourself, rhithiwr bradwrus,” Nott fired back. Harry didn’t have any idea what the insult meant, although it sounded Gaelic or Welsh, and the younger Avery’s cheeks reddened.

“You dare?” she hissed.

Greengrass had had enough. She marched forward, and, rather than drawing her wand, violently shoved the girl to the floor, then put her boot on the younger girls’ chest. “You’re pathetic.” She nudged the girl’s jaw hard with the toe of her boot, causing Lysetta to yelp. Daphne shook her head in disdain, then turned to the others. The other First Year and the older Ravenclaw had moved as soon as Lysetta hit the floor.

Harry checked if the door was locked. It wasn’t. He pulled the handle. Daphne kicked the door in for good measure. It slammed into the opposite wall, startling Dolores Umbridge quite badly. “What is the meaning of this?” she demanded. Her eyes locked on Harry, burning with hatred.

“I’m afraid that you are to step down from your position at Hogwarts. Effective immediately.”

“I will do no such thing! You insolent rats! I’ll have you expelled, all of you!”

“You won’t have that power for very much longer,” Daphne said, her voice ice cold. She drew her wand with a flourish, aiming it straight at the larger woman’s heart. “Surrender.”

“You wouldn’t dare...you...you can’t...you wouldn’t dare harm me!” she shrieked.

Feeling the need to relieve her of that delusion, Harry quickly drew his wand and blew a collection of the hideous pink kitten plates into powder, the beam almost singeing the DADA professor’s hair. Her eyes went wide with fear. She made a run for the fireplace. Nott had anticipated that and beat her easily. He cast a spell that killed the fire and sent bolts of electricity arcing up and down the fireplace. “That’s out for about a week. Might have overdone it a bit,” he mused. “Really, your sense of décor is abominable. Potter had the right idea.” With that, he began destroying the decorations of the office, aiming and firing silent Blasting Curses under his left arm. Umbridge’s desk caught fire. Harry let it burn.

“This cannot be happening. You...you will pay for this, so dearly. This is beyond school discipline. You lot are criminals!” she cried in a hysterical voice.

“Justice is in the eye of those with power,” Nott said, now finished obliterating Umbridge’s possessions. There was a glint of glee, almost a madness behind those his eyes. Harry shivered a bit. He really didn’t like Nott, although he had to admit, as he looked around the office, that he wanted him on his side. “Very shortly, that will no longer be Cornelius Fudge and his compatriots. Your time has ended, Dolores. You were tasked with defending our world from all threats, and you failed. The greatest threat to our survival as a civilization came from nowhere else but our own Ministry. It is for your complacency and arrogance that you have been cast down.”

“What are you talking about?” Umbridge demanded. “This is madness.”

“This is a coup, Professor,” Harry said softly. “A genuine, bona fide, coup d’etat. I know that you are frightened of me. I doubt you’d imagine I’d be at the center of something like this.”

Umbridge stuttered, trying to find words to express her disbelief and outrage. Daphne decided to prevent that, Silencing her with a flick of her wrist and a whispered incantation.

Luna came over, her presence having proved unnecessary. “You see it now, don’t you?” she said gently. “Oh, how wrong you were. I pity you.” None of them knew exactly to what the Ravenclaw was referring, but the color in the deposed disciplinarian’s face showed that she did. She screamed, but no sound emerged. Luna giggled. “She’s funny when she’s angry.”

Harry turned to Daphne. “Now what?”

“We hold this office. Some of the IS idiots might get it into their heads to stage a rescue attempt. We make sure they never get close.”

“Should we communicate with your father?”

Daphne shook his head. “Potter, he believes in you, and me. That means that he will assume we have succeeded until he hears otherwise. Our job is done. Well, not quite...Locomotor Mortis,” she cast. Umbridge’s legs snapped together, and she crashed forwards onto the ground. “Oh dear,” Daphne said as she saw this, without the slightest concern. She turned around. “The rest is in the hands of others. Potter, come with me. We’ll hold the corridor. Nott, keep an eye on this one.”

“Oh, my pleasure,” he said, sounding excited. If it was possible, Harry swore that Umbridge’s eyes got wider still. “I do owe her, for those detentions. A Blood Quill, really Professor? I can do much better than those sorts of primitive tools.”

Harry almost felt uncomfortable leaving Nott alone, but Luna picked up on this. “I’ll watch. I’m rubbish at fighting, anyway.”

“Hopefully it won’t come to that...put that fire out before it hits those bookshelves,” Harry snapped. Nott swiftly complied.

Harry and Daphne moved into the hallway, which was deserted. Dumbledore was nowhere to be seen. Just then, four or five IS members ran up the corridor, stopping short when they saw the two Slytherins, drawing their wands. Oh boy...

Judgment Day had arrived at the Ministry of Magic.

Rufus Scrimgeour, flanked on both sides by his most trusted Aurors, Kingsley Shacklebolt and Nymphadora Tonks, marched up the ornately decorated corridor that led to the office of the Minister of Magic. This was treason, Rufus knew, plain and simple. He suspected that things had already happened at Hogwarts, and would not suffer the shame of leaving children out to dry by backing out. Aiden Greengrass had been particularly concerned about Dolores Umbridge, for reasons that weren’t entirely apparent to the Head of the Aurors. Still, Rufus not only thought it was a good test for his young ally, but a mission he was likely to be able to carry out if he chose to do so. Aiden had assured him that his daughter was informed of the situation, and would get the job done by whatever means necessary.

In any case, he couldn’t worry about that now. All around the building, men and women he knew he could trust were loitering outside offices, in the cafeteria, in the lobby, each group assigned to find and detain members of Fudge’s government. Some of them he intended to force out of office, but others he suspected would quickly warm to their new Minister, if for no other reason than they valued their jobs. The key to the operation was to completely eradicate Fudge’s relevance in the political scene. Few of his allies would back him if he appeared to have been neutralized as a significant player. Rufus had his concerns, but was optimistic that he’d face little in the way of fierce opposition to the coup once the dust had settled.

He turned to his left. Nymphadora Tonks, her normally eccentric appearance reigned in to fit with the magnitude of the events taking place, listened for a moment, then gave a sharp nod. “Everyone is in

position. A few targets are outside their offices, so some of the arrests will be public.”

“That cannot be avoided,” Rufus said shortly. He turned to look at both of his bodyguards. “You both understand that this situation is very dangerous, do you not? While I expect political opposition to crumble, I would not be in the least surprised if McGlinchy and Dawlish put up a fierce fight. Even if they appear to be cooperative, I want them both taken down.”

“Understood,” Kingsley said softly. “I must admit I’m surprised that only three of us are here for this.”

“Unfortunately, Auror Shacklebolt, reliable and trustworthy Aurors are painfully hard to come across. I reckon a full 30 percent of my command might turn me in to Fudge if they had heard of this plot. But they will fall into line when our operation is completely successfully.”

“Even so, my dear friend, I believe it wise to have backup.”

Tonks and Shacklebolt turned toward the new voice. Rufus just sighed. “I did not agree on your presence here. If anything, it delegitimizes this coup. Go home, Aiden. I daresay your family has played its role.”

Aiden Greengrass stepped forward, flanked by two men that Rufus didn’t know by sight. “Let me introduce my associates: Nikolai Ivanov, an old family friend, and Jackson Bynes, a lifetime rival. We have been chosen by the members of our alliance to represent the interests of Britain’s unaligned Dark families. Do not be a fool, Rufus. Perhaps it pains you to admit it, but a coalition of Light and Dark staging a coup is far more legitimate than Light alone. You may not approve of our traditions and our practices, but the Ministry is supposed to represent our interests alongside yours. Even if they have been quite rubbish in that respect of late.”

Tonks glanced back at Rufus, unsure of what to do. “Aiden...”

“You need us if this coup is to establish - the ultimate goal: the defeat of the Dark Lord Voldemort. Do not pretend otherwise. If this,

our alliance, is to join with you, we will join as equal partners, nothing less. We ask for no more than what our status as citizens of Wizarding Britain entitles us to. I will not compromise on that point.”

Rufus glared at him. The fool was making a political move at the worst possible time. “You will remain at the rear.”

Aiden met his eyes. “Very well. Then let us do what we came here to do.”

Rufus nodded, looking over to Tonks. “Execute Downfall.”

Tonks began whispering into her wrist communication device, a relatively new technology for the Wizarding World, but one Scrimgeour found extremely useful. “All units, all units. Gamma Delta Alpha Alpha Bravo. Execute Downfall. Repeat, execute Downfall.”

She turned to Scrimgeour, expectant. “There’s no stopping now, sir.”

“Downfall? Really?” Ivanov scoffed. “Is the point of code phrases not to conceal the intent of a given order? That leaves little to the imagination.”

“Shut up,” Scrimgeour growled irritably. Oh, Aiden was going to pay for pulling this stunt...but not now.

They stood at a crossroads of history. There was no way of knowing if it was already too late, if Fudge had obstructed and ignored his way to a position where the Dark Lord’s victory was already inevitable. All he knew was that every passing day, their chances of winning this war weakened. Every passing day, Harry’s chances of victory became more remote...What are you thinking of, Rufus? he chastised himself. This will not be Potter’s battle...it cannot be...

“Lead the way, Kingsley,” Scrimgeour said firmly. They marched on towards destiny.

James Dawlish had seen a whole lot of political backstabbing in his career as bodyguard and political advisor to Cornelius Fudge. But this time, he wasn't prepared for what was coming. He'd thought any chance of a coup had vanished with Fudge's arrest of Bones and her co-conspirators. As he stood in the reception hall of the Auror office, a half-dozen wands pointed in his direction, he was realizing just how wrong he'd been.

"What do you think you are doing?" he demanded of the younger Auror that had first pointed him out, Blackwell, he thought his name was. Barely out of Auror School.

"We are taking back the government from those too cowardly and complacent to do the right thing," he replied loudly. Wonderful...an idealist.

"You can't win, Blackwell. None of you can," he barked to the traitors surrounding him. "The people of Wizarding Britain will not accept a coup against a legitimately elected government. Your lives are forfeit," he spat.

"The last cries of a man facing his destruction," Mad-Eye Moody said, hobbling over to join them. A half-dozen Aurors, both insurgents and loyalists, scrambled to get out of his way. The grizzled old man locked his eyes on Dawlish, looking him up and down. "I'm rather disappointed in you, James. I had high hopes for you, once. But then, politics is man's greatest enemy, isn't it."

Dawlish struggled to find his voice. "No. Alastor, you cannot...this has to be some kind of joke! How can you support these criminals?"

Moody hobbled closer. "No, my question, James, is how you could stay silent in the face of truly criminal incompetence on the part of your employer. The task of an Auror is to protect the ordinary people from all threats. Have you not seen the Prophet, boy? Seen Hogsmeade burning? Seen the lists of the dead, the stories of parents frantically trying to contact children? Obviously not, or you'd arrest yourself for a truly shameless act of dereliction of duty. You disgust me."

“Instructor Moody,” Blackwell asked. “What should we do with the prisoners?”

“Nothing,” he said, turning to face the young Auror. “You see, Mr. Blackwell, what happens here means nothing.” He pointed to the ceiling. “What happens up there will determine our success or failure.”

“The Minister!” Dawlish gasped, horror rising as he realized the implications of Moody’s statement.

“Your Minister is getting nothing less than he deserves,” Moody sneered back to him. “You needn’t fret about his safety. Rufus has his honor, at least. Unless Cornelius decides to be really stupid.”

Dawlish backed up, still struggling to comprehend the events around him. He heard screams from elsewhere in the building, heard the chaotic noises of spell-fire ripping through the home of Britain’s Magical Government. He finally bumped into a wall, and slumped to the base of it, reeling.

“This is how it all ends, then,” he said softly.

Moody snorted. “Your poor fool. This isn’t the end. This is the beginning.”

“I want to see the Minister, Fiona,” Rufus said firmly to Fudge’s personal secretary.

“I’m sorry, but he’s rather busy at the moment.”

“I’m sure he is. I believe I may have something to do with it. You will open the doors...”

“Sir, you are well aware that I may not do that.”

“...or my friends here will open them for you,” Rufus finished. “It is your choice, but I’m rather fond of the carvings. 16th century Dutch, if I’m not mistaken. Wonderfully detailed trees.”

Fiona Lancaster stared at him. Then she dropped her head. She drew her wand and overrode the lock with the password. Some obscure Goblin warrior or something. Cornelius did love his history. Too bad he never learned a thing from it. “Thank you, Fiona. You made the right choice.”

“What choice did I have?” she asked plaintively.

The massive doors swung open, revealing the Minister’s office beyond. Scrimgeour marched forward, undaunted. Tonks and Shacklebolt flanked him. Aiden and his entourage politely stayed in the background, ready to offer help if needed. Rufus would count on things to stay that way, though; Aiden never could resist getting a bit of the action himself.

Fudge clearly knew what was coming. He sat at his desk, trying to look calm, although his papers were flung about and sweat shone on his brow. To his right, Sarah McGlinchy aimed a wand directly at Scrimgeour’s heart. She soon had a pair of wands aimed at her head. Rufus did not draw his own. Violence was not his way, not when peaceful solutions could still be found. Violence was destabilizing, chaotic by its nature.

“You will stand down, sir,” McGlinchy snapped, her voice almost hysterical.

“No, Sarah, I’m afraid I will do no such thing.” Daring her, he approached the desk. “I’m sorry, Cornelius. I really am.”

“Somehow I doubt the sincerity of that statement,” Fudge said softly. He glanced down at the papers on his desk. It was at that moment Rufus realized it was his personnel file.”

“Such a long and distinguished career you’ve had,” he said, wistfully. “More than I could ever have hoped to accomplish. I’ve never much had the stomach for fighting. Perhaps that was my mistake.”

Scrimgeour said nothing. McGlinchy, her eyes glazed with desperation, tried to hold her wand steady. “Get away from the desk, sir. This is your final warning.”

“Oh, come off it, Sarah,” Shacklebolt cried. “It’s over. Any chance you had of mounting a fight has come and gone. Don’t make this harder than it has to be.”

“I seen you’ve brought friends,” Fudge said, his voice laden with distaste. “What did they offer you, Rufus, to make you take their side? I ask you, who is guilty of the real treachery here? You would ally with the likes of that rabble so that you could take my place as Minister? Truly, I expected better of you.”

Refusing to be baited, Scrimgeour held out his hand. “Your wand, Cornelius.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Your wand,” Rufus repeated. “As a token of your surrender. Surely you know the situation is hopeless. And I never figured you for a martyr.”

Looking like a broken man, Fudge drew his wand out, and offered it. “I surrender.”

“NO!” McGlinchy screamed. Fortunately for Rufus, she was shaking so badly when she cast the hex that it screamed over his head, blasting apart several shelves of books. An instant later, she took a sickly green bolt directly to the chest, and went flying into the far wall. She slid to the ground, eyes wide and glassy.

“You fool!” Aiden barked.

Scrimgeour turned to see Jackson Bynes returning his wand to the pocket of his robes. "She was a threat."

"And that is how you barbarians deal with threats?" Fudge demanded. There were genuine tears in his eyes. He made to rise, and Aiden's wand snapped up. So did Tonks', but it wasn't her he focused on. Scrimgeour made a mental note to check the room for recording equipment; Fudge was looking a bit too sympathetic at the moment, though Rufus did not doubt his sorrow at McGlinchy's death. They'd known each other for over ten years. "I have surrendered, you brute! May I not tend the body of a comrade and friend?"

"I suspect she was more than that, Cornelius," Aiden said softly. "You always had a thing for blondes."

"That's none of your business," Fudge snapped.

Tonks glanced uncertainly at him, and after a moment's hesitation, he nodded. She stepped forward. "Sir, I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to come with me."

"You too, Nymphadora? You would be so heartless?"

"My feelings do not enter into it, sir," she said firmly. "I have my orders."

"I'm sure you do," he said, glaring accusingly at his de-facto replacement.

"I'm sorry, Cornelius," Rufus said again. And he meant it.

Fudge didn't respond. He held his hands out, and Tonks cuffed them, and allowed her to escort him from the room.

It would be a long time before Rufus forgot the look on the Minister's face.

A/N: And down goes Fudge. You can be sure this isn't the last that will be spoken of the man, but Scrimgeour's victory is nearly complete.

I do dearly love poking fun at the concept of the "trio" by substituting other individuals (plus Luna) into the group, and having them do things the likes of which JKR's Golden Trio wouldn't dream. Well, maybe dream, but certainly not do. Can you see Hermione threatening a professor? Ron torching an office? Neither can I.

Speaking of which, Hermione and Harry are in need of a long conversation, and rest assured, they'll get it.

The last two chapters have sort of turned into an unexpected but I think very welcome redemption of the House of Gryffindor, with the actions of Aiden Greengrass and Ron Weasley. They have their role to play as well.

I hope you enjoyed the little scene between Dawlish and Moody as much as I did writing it. It was just a little idea that came to my mind and wouldn't go away.

Next up: Hogwarts gets DADA Professor #3 on the Year, and Hermione gives Harry have a piece of her mind.

Chapter 16: Repercussions

Remus Lupin crossed the threshold of the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom and felt, simultaneously as if he had never left and that he had walked into a world entirely separate from the one he'd been forced to leave two years ago.

Three DADA professors in one year. That's got to be some sort of record.

One had been forced to make a frantic escape to avoid imprisonment, or worse, and another had been driven from the school by three of her students, leaving her office, located a bit down the hall, resembling a war zone.

He had been met in the Entrance Hall by Minerva McGonagall; she had the look of someone who was watching the world speed past while she stood still. She stood beside him now. "We have returned the classroom to its standard configuration. The office remains...well, you'll see," she explained.

Remus nodded in appreciation. "I don't suppose you have any idea where I ought to begin," he joked.

His former Head of House did not take it that way. "Remus, I might suggest merely focusing the students on preparing for the O.W.L.s. We were already considering reconfiguring both the N.E.W.T. and elective Defense classes before Daphne arrived, recognizing the rather...chaotic education that our students have received in the subject the last few years."

"I don't suppose that you've heard anything of Dolores?" Remus had asked, trying to conceal his inappropriate glee at the woman's fate. Dolores Umbridge had been the driving force behind the defeat of multiple pieces of legislation proposed to relieve the suffering of werewolves by fully subsidizing the Wolfsbane Potion, and easing restrictions on where his people were allowed to legally reside.

"She's gone into hiding. I expect she'll try to rally support, and fail rather miserably. She's not well liked on the outside, and I suspect it

won't take her long to discover that fact. Nonetheless, knowing Scrimgeour, I suspect she'll be in protective custody within the week. I believe we are done with her."

The door to Dolores' office stood ajar, and Lupin peered inside. It was a sorry sight.

"Did you know about any of this?" he asked, indicating the scorched walls and overturned desk.

"No," she replied, her voice shaking slightly, though with anger or fear or some combination of many different emotions, he could not say. "None of us knew a thing. The first I heard was a report of a fight outside Dolores' office. I got there and nearly had my head smashed in by Harry Potter. He and two other Slytherin fifth-years, Nott and Greengrass, I believe, had terrorized and paralyzed Dolores and were engaged in a genuine firefight with members of her Inquisitorial gang."

"I heard about that," Remus said. He was rather worried by Harry's role, and by his choice of companions. Aiden Greengrass seemed as if he might be trustworthy in this particular enterprise, and his daughter seemed to follow his example, but Nott had a dark family history, and as the nephew of a convicted Death Eater and the child of a suspected Voldemort sponsor, he didn't seem like the kind of company Harry should keep.

"Of course, all of that was quite literally child's play compared with what was happening at the Ministry. I have to hand it to them; the speed of the operation was impressive. And I've always had a bit of a soft spot for Rufus. But I didn't see this coming, Remus. I was just blindsided by the entire affair."

"What about Albus?"

"I don't really know. He's been scarcely seen over the past few days. He wasn't directly involved, I know that, but he might have been advised that things were about to happen. However, I suspect that shy of a few rumors and suspicions, he was just as surprised as the rest of us."

"Quite a day, then."

"Yes, quite," McGonagall replied. "Four students in Hospital Wing, after they were foolish enough to challenge Potter and Greengrass. We're lucky no one was killed."

"They weren't so lucky at the Ministry, I hear."

"A few casualties. Most notably, Sarah McGlinchy."

Remus tried to recall the girl. She'd been a Gryffindor a few years behind him. She'd never really fit in, and spent most of her time on her own. Nothing particularly significant popped out. She was hardly the first of his schoolmates to meet an early fate, and scarcely among the list of those he cared for the most. "What's the reaction on the street?"

"Well, you know how difficult it is to judge these things. The Prophet broke the news shortly afterwards, but somehow it didn't really sink in for a few days. Generally, I think Scrimgeour's authority is being recognized. I expect he'll start making some public appearances and radio addresses soon to clarify the situation."

"What about the students?"

McGonagall shrugged. "I'm not sure they'd be shocked by anything except the walls of Hogwarts falling down at this point. Everyone has been rather quiet and subdued; I sense many of them merely want to get back to their normal activities. I don't believe any of them truly mourn Dolores, though."

"She never made many friends."

"That is an understatement, my dear Remus," McGonagall said, a hint of smile breaking through.

"I was trying to be polite. I was taught not to speak ill of my predecessors."

"Your mother was a fine woman, Remus, but I doubt she would have objected to bending the rules slightly in this particular case."

"Regardless," Remus said. He gestured to the office. "What state should I expect my old office to be in?" He'd preferred the room adjacent to the DADA classroom – it had helped him focus on his responsibilities as a Professor.

"I do not believe anyone has touched it since Daphne. She had not really made it her own in any case. I perceived a certain discomfort; I think she knew that she didn't belong here, but Albus asked and she could not turn him down."

"There are few better qualified to teach defensive magic than the Grey Maiden."

"And also few with such a temperament which is so unbefitting an educator," McGonagall snapped back. "I was receiving mountains of complaints, Remus, from those students who did not recall signing up for Auror bootcamp."

"Surely it wasn't that bad," Remus said, opening the door. The room appeared to be frozen in time. A few trinkets and pictures lined the desk, a number of well-worn books filled the bookshelves, and the place was in a bit of a general state of disarray. Daphne would have her moments of neatness and organization, but generally considered it unimportant. Essays, some marked up, other not, were strewn across the desk. Remus moved around, examining his old friend's workspace. His eyes flitted over the pictures, falling upon a younger version of himself, his arm awkwardly wrapped around a beaming young Daphne O'Connor, Lily Evans standing demurely beautiful in the background. He couldn't remember when this picture was taken. Probably during the short period in which they were sort-of dating, he supposed. A long time ago. Lifetimes, really. His eyes moved away from the token of his past. He saw more images, a few with Lily, a brilliant newlywed Daphne Dressler in her husbands' arms, kissing his cheek. They'd been so beautiful together. Daphne was older in the rest of the photos, her face marred by the terrible scars of that terrible day. And with her was Harry. Hermione and Tonks featured once in a while, but the most common face in them all was Harry.

He is everything to her, Remus thought. All that she has left.

"I've never been able to do that," McGonagall said softly, noticing Remus's attention to the pictures.

"Sorry?"

"My husband died of an illness, shortly before the war. I haven't been able to look at a picture of Robert without completely losing myself since."

"I'm sorry."

"Much time has passed, and I have moved on," McGonagall replied, a bit stiffly. "Perhaps she should have as well."

"Perhaps," Remus echoed, though he was fairly certain she had. "I almost don't want to disturb this place. I feel as an intruder, a unwelcome observer peering into the intimacy of another's soul."

"Very poetic."

"Reynold Longwood," Remus confirmed. "Always been a favorite of mine. A prose writer, not a poet. A brilliant man. He hasn't written anything in ages, though."

McGonagall tried to regain a veneer of professionalism. "Should I draw up a timetable for you? You are welcome to continue Dolores' schedule, but I warn you, she was a bit of an early bird."

"I think it's wise not to disturb the students any more than absolutely necessary at this point. I'll just resume normal classes, starting tomorrow. I don't suppose Dolores left any notes?"

"If she did, I recommend they be burnt, instead of read," McGonagall said disdainfully. "You'll find nothing useful there."

Remus sighed. Then again, he thought, I never expected this to be easy.

Hermione leaned against the cool stone of the corridor wall, taking in a series of deep breaths. Never, in her wildest dreams, had she imagined that the prospect of talking to the boy that for years had been her best friend in the world would be so daunting. Though a part of her wasn't sure that that was even the case anymore; that the Harry Potter with whom she'd shared her time in the Wizarding World, through the worst traumas and best triumphs of her young life, still existed. Never had Hermione imagined that the Harry Potter she knew would take such rash and spectacular actions without consulting her, with at least mentioning that something big was about to happen. There had been time when philosophical differences and personal troubles had driven them apart, but she had never really feared losing him...well, at least, not while he still drew breath.

In pocket of her robes, weighing her down like a hundred-kilo paperweight, was a folded piece of paper. On that was a hand written note. A note she'd been dreading for so long. A note that, if she was honest with herself, she should have expected earlier, and indeed ought to be stunned it had taken this long.

Hermione,

Your father and I have been following some of things that have been happening in 'your' world, because we were hearing rumors and were concerned for your safety. We've done a bit of research, using the resources you showed us, and to say the least we're quite disappointed in you as well as ourselves that this dangerous situation has been allowed to go on as long as it has.

Darling, we understand why you haven't said anything, and we're sorry you felt compelled to hide so much from us. But we are your parents and we love you. And we have decided that we would like you to leave Hogwarts for the time being. You are just a girl, Hermione, mature as you may be, and we can hardly sleep at night imagining that we have put you in such peril.

We are certainly willing to talk this over before any decisions are made. But we urge you to consider our proposal. It need not be permanent, and we can make arrangements to send you to a fine school where a girl of your intelligence and work ethic will be appreciated.

Please respond as soon as you can.

With all the love in the world,

Your Mum and Dad

At long last, her two worlds were colliding, and there seemed to be nothing she could do to stop it. She couldn't bear the thought of leaving Hogwarts, let alone leaving Harry to face such stupendous challenges on his own. And Harry wasn't her only friend here, as much as he did mean to her. She tried to imagine living a normal life, going to a normal school, all the while knowing that her friends were in a fight for their very survival. She shivered with revulsion. I cannot do that.

But she did love her parents dearly. It had pained her greatly to engage in such deceit, to conceal the true nature of her life, to lie with shameful ease and frequency in front of them. To never, ever, allow either of her parents to see her midriff, and the four-year old scar which cut across it. She had been concerned that she might need to break the law against Underage Magic with a Glamour Charm if she had been due for a visit with a physician, but it had not come up. Hogwarts did not require Muggle medical exams. There were some small mercies to be grateful for.

And that was why she was here, in the dungeons of the castle, a few meters from the hidden entrance to the Slytherin Common Room and Dormitories, beyond which she knew she would find Harry. She knew the password, of course; Harry still made sure to let her know when it changed, and she did the same with the Gryffindor password. The Fat Lady wasn't overly fond of Harry, but he rarely visited Gryffindor Tower. Indeed, she could not remember the last time he had.

She was standing here, preparing herself, because there was a possibility, however remote, that she would not get another chance.

Steeling herself, breathing a sigh of relief that no Slytherins had noticed her lurking, Hermione advanced toward the nondescript wall. Well, at a distance at least. If one looked carefully enough, the carved head of a serpent became visible a few inches from the top of the wall. "Death has no shadow," she whispered quietly. It shouldn't have surprised her that Snape would choose such a morbid password. Although in these times, she wasn't sure she could blame him.

With a hiss and the gentle groaning of polished stone sliding back and disappearing into the wall to the right, Hermione gained entrance to Slytherin. The entrance corridor was empty, but she could hear voices ahead. She was wearing her Gryffindor robes; not that it mattered, given that the entire school knew her by sight.

As she walked slowly into the Common Room, a high rectangular cavern sunk a meter or so beneath the level of the entrance hall, and descended down the black marble steps, she knew she was being watched. The reactions to the sudden and presumably unwelcome appearance of a Gryffindor in hostile territory were mixed. Some of the older students pretended not to notice her, though a few hissed comments to their neighbors. A few of the younger students did a bit of a double-take, not entirely sure they believe their eyes. Hermione looked around the Common Room, taking in the luxurious green and silver banners and brilliant mosaics of intertwined serpents that decorated the walls. A massive fireplace, larger than that in Gryffindor Tower, provided heating for the students, who were scattered about on emerald green couches, armchairs, or small tables. It suddenly occurred to her that she had never actually come this far into the Slytherin Dormitory. She had never actually seen Harry's bed, or Ginny's for that matter. It was just something better avoided than risked, especially if a more ideal meeting place could be found. Ginny was generally welcome in Gryffindor Tower, as were her mates, Anne and Melissa, though Ron had mentioned that he had needed to explain to some of the First Years why this was so.

Well, she hadn't come here to fret about inter-house relations. Not strictly, at least.

Scanning the room, she soon found her eyes locked with Harry's. He was doing his best not to show surprise to see her there, but it was pretty clear he had not been expecting her to march into Slytherin territory uninvited. A few Slytherins were now glaring in Harry's direction, correctly assuming that he had given away the password and location of the entrance to an outsider. Hermione drew a strange amount of satisfaction from that. That was quite unusual. In the past, she might have felt sorry for him.

Hermione walked toward where he sat, books strewn across one of the small tables, a page of notes sitting beside a rough outline and a goblet of water. From the state of disorganization in his workspace, it appeared he had been at work for a while. He did not seem to notice her approach, fumbling around for a book in the pile, and then flipping to the index. But she didn't quite get to the table before he looked up. "Hello Harry," she said gently. "What's all of this?"

"About a week's worth of essays for McGonagall," he replied. "This is the last one; there were two before this one."

"You've been missing classes."

"I have a lot of demands on my time, as you are very well aware. I will try not to miss any more classes...well, I can't promise that for History of Magic."

"You missed Professor Lupin's class yesterday," she pointed out.

"I know; I felt bad about that, but I had letters to write. A whole lot of people want to know just what my involvement was in the coup. It's a bit of a tricky subject."

"I'm sure," Hermione replied shortly, demonstrating just how interested she was in his excuses. She tried to keep her temper under control. Shouting at Harry would likely make him defensive, and she would lose the moral high ground she felt she had. Harry tended to listen to her when she could show herself to be in the right.

"I suppose I have some things to talk about with you," he said, putting down his quill.

"I suppose," Hermione replied evenly. She could sense that she was getting to him with her neutral tone.

"I do have quite a bit of work left to do."

"Well, that's your problem, isn't it?" Hermione snapped, surprising even herself. Harry raised an eyebrow.

"Alright then," he said, gesturing towards the door. "We're a bit far from our usual spot."

"Not that I've found you there when I've looked," she pointed out. She definitely saw a twinge of guilt there. Ginny had commented occasionally that Hermione had more than a little Slytherin in her. The thought bothered her less than it probably should. It was not as though she ever felt at home in her own house, even though they were treating her decently at this point.

"Come on then, my room," he said, closing his book.

Slytherin's dorm rooms were more accommodating than one might have suspected of dungeon habitations. The ceilings were higher than should have been possible, likely the product of magical construction, which had the desirable property of not relying on conventional physics. Each student had a four-poster bed, just like those in Gryffindor. A fireplace with a small mantle provided heat, and a few armchairs and padded benches were situated around the beds. Harry gestured for her to stay put as he determined if the room was empty. Satisfied, he beckoned her forward.

"Alright, then, what are we going to talk about first?" he asked.

"So you do acknowledge that there are things to discuss?" she asked, almost a bit surprised.

Harry shrugged. "I may be less than considerate at times, but I'm not a fool. I knew there would be consequences for...not facilitating your involvement in some recent developments."

"That's a diplomatic way of putting it."

"I'm in a diplomatic mindset," he explained. "Poor Hedwig is going to need a break soon. I've already had to borrow a couple of school owls."

Hermione stayed silent. "If I had asked you to participate in assaulting and detaining a teacher, would you have agreed? I'm not going to make excuses; I did think of involving you, but in hindsight even that was foolish. But I still meant to consult you. Things moved rather quickly. I was sort of swept up in the entire thing."

"By Daphne Greengrass and Theodore Nott," she added. "Not exactly the most respectable students in your year."

"On the contrary, they are quite renowned...just not in the circles you would approve of."

"And that's the problem, isn't it? I can't help but feel that I've become, well...unnecessary. Even a liability."

"Do you really believe that?" Harry asked, looking concerned.

"Maybe," she said. "That was an enormous decision you made, a massive risk you took, and I found out with everyone else. I knew you'd been talking about the possibility of the Minister being removed, but I thought it was just wishful thinking. Do you have any idea what you are doing?"

Harry shrugged. "We're waiting, mostly. Waiting to see how others react. Scrimgeour has solidified some support, but there is going to be an open session of the pureblood councils and the Wizengamot in a few days, to hash out some of the differences. Aiden will be there. He's invited me, but I don't want to detract from the purpose of the conference, so I turned down the offer.."

"Well, that's good."

"Hermione, what do you want from me?"

I want my friend back, she cried in her mind, but managed to keep those thoughts there. "I want you to be honest with me. And I want you to be careful. I've noticed you spending time with Giselle Reisor. You were in Hogsmeade with her." Instead of me, she added mentally. Sure, she's told Harry when he asked that she was going with Lisa, but that arrangement had been made later. Maybe it was petty, but she was feeling ignored and neglected, and had not yet worked up the courage to do what she was doing now.

"Right. About that."

"Last time you mentioned her to me, you were rather suspicious of her background."

"Oh, I still am," Harry said. "But perhaps I did jump to conclusions. I have little doubt her stated background is manufactured. But that could be due to a variety of reasons. She's English, but that's about all I can tell. I suspect 'Reisor' isn't her real name."

"And none of this bothers you," she stated disbelievingly.

"Hermione, how fair is it for us to suspect every person with a possibly sketchy background as being a sympathizer or agent of Voldemort? I judged her before I ever knew her. I do not think my initial assessment was at all accurate. She's hiding something, definitely. But I think it's more along the lines of some embarrassment or shame in her family's past. I don't sense any deceit from her."

"What does that mean?" Hermione demanded. "You can't read feelings, Harry. You can't perceive hidden intents."

"Actually, I can. Well, not precisely, but emotions and strong feelings are reflected in individual magical auras. Like ripples in a pond, to put it simply. A consequence of my unnatural magical ability is a heightened sensitivity to outside magic. I'm only just beginning to find

out all of these things about me," Harry said. "It's complicated. I don't understand it myself, and even Dumbledore is a bit baffled in some cases."

"So you trust her?"

"Until I have reason not to, and within reason, yes. Do you have a problem with that?"

Harry had backed her into a corner, possibly without meaning to. If she disagreed, she would be betraying an immature and irrational distrust of Slytherins, something she did not want to possess. "Does this have anything to do with Ginny and you not being together anymore?"

She caught a flash of hurt in his eyes. "Not really," he said. "I'm pretty sure she has a bit of a thing for me, but it is not mutual. It is nice to have someone in my own House to talk to."

"I thought that was supposed to be me."

"You aren't in my House."

"That's not the point and you know it!" Hermione snapped. "I'm your friend, Harry. I've been with you since First Year, and I have always been there for you. How am I supposed to feel when I'm being shut out and replaced."

"You aren't being replaced."

"Then why was it you and Daphne and Nott that marched into Umbridge's office? Oh, I know Luna was there, but that was not the part that mattered. It was Slytherin's little act of rebellion, the Slytherins of your year making a statement that they were players in this great game. No need for idealistic Gryffindors."

Harry was getting annoyed now. "Hermione, it was not like that."

"I don't like Nott, Harry. He frightens me. I've seen...I've seen him do some things, say some things that bother me."

"He's useful," Harry said simply. "And he's dependable, under certain circumstances."

"And the fact that he's a deplorable human being doesn't matter then?"

Hermione felt the hairs on her arms stand up as Harry's frustration created a cloud of charged magical energy. She tried not to be unnerved, remembering that this was how Ginny had ended up in Hospital Wing. "Do you have a point? Can I do something to make it up to you? What do you want from me, Hermione? Why are you here?"

"I'm here because I want to know where we stand. And because I might not get another chance."

Harry blinked. "What are you talking about?"

She brandished the letter. "My parents heard about the coup. They want me to leave Hogwarts."

"You can't," Harry said simply, unthinkingly, as if he could merely tell her that and make it true.

"Can't I?" she asked.

"You...you need to stay here. You are needed here. This is where you belong."

"Do you need me?" she asked, fighting back a few tears.

"You...you mean a lot to me, Hermione."

"Then why won't you listen to me!" she protested. "This is wrong, Harry. This...this coup, this conspiracy...is all going too far."

"Sometimes difficult decisions need to be made for the sake of everyone," he said softly.

"And they need to be made by you? What possible authority do you have?"

"I have my name, and I have my reputation."

"And is that more important than your friends?" she asked, tears breaking through this time. "Than me? Than Ginny?"

There was real hurt in his eyes now, and he looked down for a moment. "I've...I've lost her. I blew it. I can't...I don't have time to think about that."

"Yes you do, and that's what you need to understand. You can't just put your life on hold." He was infuriating sometimes...

"Unfortunately, Hermione, you are dead wrong about that. You are right in one respect: I don't have any authority. But I need to build on the reputation I have. If I am going to earn the trust of both sides of the ideological divide, I need to demonstrate that I am wise beyond my years...whether I actually am or not."

Her frustration boiling over, Hermione sniffled and angrily fought back her tears. "I don't know you anymore, Harry. You've changed, and I don't like it. I don't like it at all."

"I'm sorry," he said. It sounded like he meant it. He moved forward to embrace her, but she backed away.

"No. We're not done yet. Is this how you want it to end? I might not be here in another week."

"There's got to be something...could I talk to them?" he asked desperately. Always so sure of himself. Or keen to make others think that, anyway.

Hermione laughed bitterly. "Surely you understand that you are exactly why my parents want to take me out of all of this. My best friend is being honed into a war leader. Not that they know that, but..."

Harry sighed, sitting down on the edge of his bed. "Hermione, I don't know what I can do for you. I don't think I can give you what you want. I can't abandon what I've begun. I can...I can find ways to get you involved. Maybe I can make you understand, win you over. But I have to stay with what I am doing, because I don't really know what else to do. All I know is that my life, all our lives, are in mortal danger, and the closer anyone gets to me the more acute that danger becomes."

"Which is exactly what my parents do not want to hear."

"Then lie to them," Harry said briefly.

He still didn't understand. "Harry, this is my mum and dad. Am I supposed to look them straight in the eyes and tell them their only daughter is completely safe here?"

"The reality is that you aren't safe anywhere, Hermione. You're Muggleborn, and so you have a big target on your back. You will until Voldemort is defeated."

"But I can't tell them that. They'll panic. They'll run off to Australia or something. And they'll take me with them."

"Maybe you would be safe there. Maybe that's for the best." His voice betrayed how confident he felt about that assertion.

Hermione shook her head furiously. "Oh no you don't, Harry. You've dragged me along through all of this already – I'm not abandoning you now. I couldn't live with myself."

"Then you've got one choice."

"They'll kill me when they find out. Or worse, they'll be so disappointed in me. They trust me, Harry, and that's worth a lot."

"I'm sorry," he said, and this time she was sure he meant it. Overwhelmed by emotion, she lunged forward and captured him in a tight embrace. After initial hesitation, he returned it. "I'm so sorry, Hermione."

She sat back, laughing bitterly. "If I could have only imagined this when I got that letter. A whole new world of possibilities opened up for me. A whole new set of ways to die horribly."

"You know that it was more than that," Harry told her. "Are you telling me that if you could do it over again, tear up your Hogwarts letter, never learn of your potential as a witch, you'd do that?"

The idea revolted her. "Of course not," she said strongly. "When I was growing up, I always knew that I was missing something, some part of myself that I was just barely conscious of. It drove me mad."

"Then you have to stop rejecting the lumps that come along with it."

"Lumps? Harry, we're in a war. I'm sixteen years old; I'm far too young for that. We're all far too young for this."

Harry leveled his gaze at her, with a frightening intensity that made her take a step back. Something seemed to have shifted behind those emerald eyes, some piece of knowledge falling into place like a piece of an enormous jigsaw puzzle. "That, Hermione, is exactly the attitude that is going to get us all killed. I don't want this. None of us wants it. But we have it. And until you realize that and stop complaining, you'll be of no use to anyone. I need you, Hermione. I need you by my side, I need you to yell at me when I'm being a prat." Harry choked back what might have been a sob. "When it comes down to it...I can't do this without you."

As pleased as she was to hear that...mostly, it saddened her a bit that it was so unexpected. At least she knew what had just clicked in his mind now. Hermione took a deep breath. He was right. Damn him, he was always right when it came to these things. "Then you've got me," she declared, and pulled him into another embrace, smothering her tears with his robes. "You've got me."

"...I don't think I handled that terribly well," Harry admitted later.

Giselle considered that briefly as they walked along at the base of the mound that Hogwarts stood upon. It was a cool spring evening, the rolling hills of the Scottish lowlands quite beautiful basked in an

orange glow from the setting sun. "I suppose, though it sounds as though it could have gone worse. You did get what you wanted."

"But I didn't get it how I wanted," Harry protested.

"Oh come now, you question what I'm doing in Slytherin and then you go Gryffindor on me."

"Honestly is not exclusively a trait of Gryffindors."

"Yes, but it isn't the cardinal virtue of Slytherins either," she replied, flicking her long black hair over her shoulders as the wind picked up. "You got her to agree with your basic premise which she had been resisting for ages, you saved your friendship..."

"...for now, at least," Harry muttered darkly.

Giselle looked annoyed at being cut off. "...and most impressively of all, you got out of there without her slapping or hexing you."

"That's hardly something to be proud of," Harry retorted. "How fantastic is it for a person to have a difficult conversation with someone they've been best friends with for this long without a fight breaking out?"

"Potter, I'm really not sure I understand what the problem is."

"Harry, if you don't mind," he replied. "Unless you want me to start butchering your last name."

"Rie-z-orr," she repeated slowly.

"I can't roll an 'r' to save my life, and you know that, Giselle."

"Oh fine. Be an ignorant Anglo-Saxon lout."

Harry rolled his eyes. Giselle had revealed more about her family's history, though he has his doubts about its veracity. She had said her family name came from minor nobility in the Plantagenet period when the King of England ruled most of France, including her family's

ancestral home, lower Normandy. Never gaining much wealth or fame, the Reisor family been loyal if undecorated servants of the French monarchy following the Hundred Years' war, before moving to England after losing most of their fortune during the French Revolution. Giselle had been stricken by a lengthy illness that left her unable to attend school for years, and despite her father's desire to send his daughter Durmstrang, she had insisted upon Hogwarts.

It all seemed reasonable, really. Wizarding families could certainly hide in obscurity, and from the sounds of it, the name had actually died out at one point before being resurrected by a particularly ambitious member of the family seeking to distance himself from a corruption scandal involving his relatives. It was a bit of an odd name, though. And when asked about her illness, she had refused to speak it, claiming she wanted to move on from the worst years of her life. Perhaps she would open up further as they spent more time together.

Harry did like her, despite his early misgivings, but worried that she might just be filling the void left by Ginny's absence. The two girls were very, very different. It was more than that Ginny was a Slytherin he could talk to without feeling like every word meant success or failure, because Giselle was also, and when she was comfortable, she was very low key, without the intensity that Ginny had in abundance. That intensity, he had decided, was why he liked Ginny so much and was thoroughly uninterested in Giselle as anything more than a friend. Such thoughts made him feel better about his situation, but miss the feisty red-head he had made such a large part of his life. Bitter regret threatened to overwhelm him, but he fended it off. There was nothing he could do about it now anyway.

He realized Giselle was humming something underneath her breath, and listened more closely. "What's that?"

Giselle looked at him, smiled, and sang out more audibly.

"In Scarlet Town, where I was born,

T'was a fair maid dwelling

Made many a youth cry well-a-day

And her name was Barbry' Allen

"That's Scottish, isn't it?" Harry asked. He'd heard it before, somewhere.

"Oh, there are hundreds of versions," Giselle replied brightly. "Dad used to sing it to me. I reckon I'm better at it than he ever was, though."

"You have a beautiful voice," Harry admitted. "You ought to use it more often."

"You think so?" Giselle asked, looking flattered. "I've always been too scared to let people hear it." She smiled unhappily. "How I'm supposed to meet the expectations that come with being a pureblood scion when I don't believe I'm worth a damn is another question entirely."

"Come on, that's being a bit unfair. You put in a good show at the last D.A. I daresay that Susan Bones would vouch for your ability." Giselle had, to the surprise of no one more than herself, knocked one of Hufflepuff's most competent duelists to the floor after an intense five-minute battle. Giselle had a certain deceptiveness about her, and it carried over into her dueling style. She'd lull opponents into a false sense of security, fighting defensively, and then creatively overpowering them when their defenses were weaker. In Harry's experience, an average duelist was at their best in the first 2-3 minutes of intense combat. Dueling was taxing, both mentally, physically, and, of course, magically.

"I wouldn't even have been there if you hadn't insisted," Giselle replied. "But it was fun. And I wasn't as miserable as I expected."

"I'm surprised that you have practiced so little."

"I've worked hard on defensive magic," she said. "But I prefer to avoid conflict all together, or use the element of surprise."

They walked on for a little while longer, Harry lost in his thoughts.

"Ginny doesn't like me very much, does she?" Giselle said abruptly.

"I wouldn't...I don't think that's true."

Giselle sighed. "You're either blind, or ignoring the obvious. She's jealous."

"Should she be?" Harry asked.

Giselle shrugged, eyeing him. "I don't know, Harry. We've become pretty close."

"I don't want anything like that right now. I don't have time for it, and I won't...I don't want to do that to Ginny. I've been terrible to her, and she's still trying to be my friend."

"Oh. Well, I suppose that's right of you. A bit Gryffindorish...'

"Let's not go there," Harry said, suddenly less pleased about the direction of this conversation. "It's my decision, and I'd like you to respect that."

Giselle scoffed. "Someone's defensive. Alright, Potter. I'll cease my desperate attempts to seduce you. Your chastity is safe with me. Because I'm your friend...really, Potter, are you going to be so juvenile about this?"

Harry glared at her. "I try to avoid complications when I can. Don't belittle me for it."

Giselle returned a skeptical look. "Sure, Potter, whatever you say. I won't cause you any trouble."

If only I could believe that. It's never that simple.

Daphne ran. Through trees, rain-moistened fields, over streams, into the outskirts of towns. She could feel the pursuit bearing down on her once more. If she could give them the slip, she'd probably have

another few weeks of relative freedom. But right now, the Aurors on her tail had all the ferocity and determination of a pack of bloodhounds. She'd seen them, watched them questioning locals in some of the small villages she'd fled to, ever since being forced to flee London when she was nearly caught up in an unrelated sting operation on Knockturn Alley, and been identified in the process when she nearly ran headlong into a backup patrol. Only good fortune and the confusion of Diagon Alley had saved her, but she knew that her options were limited. She'd been trying to make her way north, apparating when she dared. The normal method of personal transportation had serious drawbacks for an individual in her circumstances. When a recruit joined the Aurors (reflecting the immense responsibility and liability inherent in being a member of the wizarding world's only organized and combat-trained police force cum army), he or she performed a series of tasks in order to record his or her magical signature, just like a fingerprint. Proximity was required, but a good Auror could identify and even track an apparating witch or wizard whose magical signature was on record. Daphne had little doubt that her visage now adorned a slot on the Ministry's Most Wanted list, and as such, her own magic had become her enemy.

Hunted like a criminal, she'd been forced to become a criminal. She was not proud that she had been reduced to petty theft of Muggles to acquire enough funds to keep herself fed, but she did what she had to do. If nothing else, she was a survivor. And she was determined to see Harry again. To warn him. To protect him. That was her *raison d'etre*, plain and simple. But to do all of that she needed to stay free.

She paused near a copse of trees, dropping to one knee to catch her breath, and listening closely for the signs of pursuit. The cold moisture of the damp ground soaked into the fabric of her trousers, but she ignored it, focused on recovering her endurance, and planning her next move. She had lasted as long as she had by staying outside the bounds of the wizarding world, frequenting exclusively Muggle villages since she'd passed into through Northern Yorkshire and made her way towards Lancashire. She might have crossed the border already, but she wasn't sure. The problem with this was, of course, that she was entirely isolated from any news in the wizarding community. She was aware of the few magical

communities in this area of the country, but her lack of mobility and fear of capture meant she was mostly on her own.

Noise behind her. Shouting. Familiar voices and Revealing Charms. Refreshed enough, she bolted down a narrow road, past a baffled Muggle on a bicycle, over a low hedge, and then along it, beginning a wide arc that would take her behind her pursuers, back towards one of the small villages that dotted the landscape. If they were any good, they would be ready for that, but Daphne guessed that she was dealing with, at most, a half-dozen individuals. She recalled the manhunt for Sirius Black of two years earlier, wondering if she'd reached such a level of infamy that the Muggle police would be looking for her. She had seen nothing to suggest that the search was so widespread...or desperate, but in the small villages she had tended to seek shelter in, she probably shouldn't have expected to, either.

She ducked into a small patch of brush, dropping to a knee, catching her breath while she listened for the signs of pursuit. She considered risking her own Revealing Charm, just for an instant, to discover the number and disposition of the individuals following her, but decided against it. What she could perceive indicated confusion, uncertainty. To use magic in this circumstance would be to invite detection. It was something she had been told by Moody himself, some day so long ago, during her apprenticeship to the Auror legend.

"Catching fugitives from our world is a matter of patience, and perception. But if you can manage those, it really is not that much of a challenge. Think about it, O'Connor. What binds us all together is magic. We use it, we take it for granted, and through this, we come to depend on it. If a wizard or witch on the run uses magic that can be detected, he or she takes a tremendous risk. By using magic, they have power, power that should be respected, feared. But if they don't use magic, well...they aren't going to be that much of a bother to us, now, are they? The mission of the Aurors is not about justice, for all the high-handed bollocks you'll hear from the government. No, Daphne, it is about protection. Protection of the magical peoples of this land of ours, and also, though many would like to forget this, protection of the Muggles from the excesses and abuses of wizardkind. After all, if they had a mind to, they could probably wipe

us out by sheer numbers. Best not to stir up that kind of hornet's nest."

And now it was she that the Aurors thought wizarding Britain needed protection from. Here they were, using valuable resources to track her down while she did nothing but cling to the edge and try to survive. Surely there was a better use of talent and manpower. But Fudge, whose government had decided that her capture was such a priority, wasn't interested in defending the people he was charged to protect. He was the worst kind of coward.

The presence of ministry forces hunting the countryside for her had become much greater in the past couple weeks. Out of touch entirely with the politics, and indeed any news of the wizarding world, Daphne could only speculate. She knew that Fudge feared her; feared her power, her reputation, her reckless gallantry in the face of his frightened inaction. Perhaps he'd hoped for her capture to come much sooner, and frustrated by the lack of progress, he'd ordered an intensification of efforts to find her. That kind of short-sighted and petty thinking was just like him.

She continued to listen, not risking a glance over the brush just yet. The sounds of pursuit had faded, though it was difficult to know. She was tired, and cold, more from the dampness of her clothing than the air temperature. Her concentration was definitely slipping. She was in danger of making elementary mistakes if she wasn't careful.

Daphne waited in her hiding place for what felt like ages, but was probably about a half-hour. She felt the telltale twinge of Seeking Spells brushing against the fabric of her magical consciousness. More broad and ranging than Revealing Charms, Seeking Spells could, if used properly on an unsuspecting foe, act as a sort of scanner, not unlike the echolocation that bats used to navigate dark caves. Muggles had something like it, she thought, Radar, or something like that. As much as she generally believed that wizards were, though through chance and fortune rather than genetic superiority, more advanced than their Muggle counterparts, non-magical folk did often have the capacity to surprise her.

She could barely feel the Spells now, which meant that their sweep was getting farther and farther away. She'd eluded pursuit. For now. She was also hungry, tired, and aware that it was getting dark. She'd slept in fields before, though once she'd been discovered by a rather irritated Muggle farmer who had told her to clear off. There was a pub in town, and at the moment, a warm meal and the possibility of a real bed sounded absolutely glorious to her. Standing cautiously, she examined her immediate surroundings with all of her senses. She saw open moors, the lights of the small village. She heard the whistling of the wind through the trees at her back, the distant cries of birds, the rumble of far-off thunder. She smelled the wet, damp grass under her feet, with maybe a touch of something cooking from the nearby town. She felt the bone-chilling cold, and the desperation that clung to her like a soaked garment.

She set off towards the dim lights of the town, swiftly crossing an empty road and a stretch of open field. She became aware that something was looming ahead in the growing darkness, something obscuring the relative brightness of the sleepy village. Coming closer, she found herself standing in what could only be one of the scores of ruined abbeys and churches that were scattered across the English countryside. She could have continued on, but instead walked up to the highest remaining walls, taking note of her surroundings. If this was a church, she stood within the center of the cruciform. She reached out, brushing her nearly-numb hands over the weathered stone. There were memories here. Some magical, even. She could feel them, like footprints of the past, echoes of what had been. They were strong here. Puzzled, she considered her knowledge of England's religious history, a history that, as all things in this world had been, had not been the exclusive province of Muggles. Her father had once told her of the cheeky but truly conscientious Thomas More, a man who had died for a faith that stood entirely outside his magic, at least the way Daphne saw it. But as her father had explained to her so long ago, it had been by his God that More believed he'd been gifted with such power.

What happened here? she wondered. Some were better at reading this kind of magic than others, and while Daphne had the training and the sensitivity to detect its presence, she could do nothing to read it.

"Who's there? You ought to come out of the cold; it's no good staying out there," a voice called out. Daphne tried to place the accent. Lancastrian, she thought. Rural, but definitely Lancastrian. She peered out to see a hunched over form slowly coming towards her, a torch in his hand. "You there, I can see you? What are you doing out here?"

"I'm just traveling," Daphne answered, truthfully as she could. "Just passing through, really."

"Well, darling, it's getting dark out here. Have you eaten yet? You look rather famished, if I do say so myself."

Daphne was cautious, but this Muggle seemed completely harmless, indeed he seemed quite a kind individual. The torch light shined up towards her face. "What have you got there? Some kind of stick?"

Her wand. Daphne quickly stowed it in her traveling robes. "Oh, nothing. Just a little thing I picked up somewhere. I'm Elizabeth? And you are?"

"Well, my full name's William Brandon, but folk tend to call me Willy. Grew up around here, you know."

"I'm pretty far from home, myself," Daphne admitted.

"Oh I can see that, darling. Come on with me. Leave this old place to its rest."

Daphne gave the ruins one last once-over, before looking up at him. "I'm sorry, but I've been walking for a while. Where exactly am I?"

"This is Sawley. Specifically, you are standing in the south transept of what used to be the Church of the Abbey around here. Knocked down by order of Henry VIII, back in the 16th century. Cistercian Order, the monks were. Came out here looking for some peace and quiet, trying to get closer to God...I suspect you may have guessed, but I'm a local guide for English Heritage, see. But I doubt you're all that interested in all that. Come over here, and let's get you inside."

Daphne had been on her own long enough that she was surprised when he gave her a second glance, staring in confusion and a bit of horror at what she realized was her disfigured face. The Glamour Charm must have worn off. "It's not as bad as it looks," she told him. "There was an accident, when I was younger. Left some scars."

"Sorry to hear that, dear. And sorry to stare."

"It's quite alright," Daphne replied, trying to keep her voice level.

"Well, then, this way, Elizabeth." Daphne followed him into the town, crossing an empty street and moving toward what was very clearly a pub. "You've got some interesting clothing there," he said, taking note of her robes and cloak.

"It's an old family thing. And quite useful in this sort of weather," she explained briefly. "Do you think I might be able to get a place to sleep for the night?"

"Oh, certainly. I know the owner, owes me a favor or two. I'll get you sorted."

Daphne smiled in thanks. She hoped the scars didn't make it look too gruesome.

An hour and a half later, her belly full for the first time in months, lying on what felt like the most comfortable bed in the world, Daphne cast subtle defensive charms on the door, closed her eyes, and let sleep take her.

She dreamt of Harry.

A/N: And with a gratuitous insertion of medieval and early modern English history into the story, you should know that it's me!

So, while I was waiting for this chapter to come back, I started looking back on some of the reviews I'd gotten, trying to regain a feel for how my audience perceived things. I'm not entirely sure why I seem to get a lot of praise followed shortly thereafter by harsh criticism from those that seem mostly disappointed with how I'm going about things

(although the grammatical errors are annoying, and I'm working on that). Perhaps it's because I set expectations high? I don't mean to sound petulant, and I appreciate all of the feedback that I've received, but I've always felt like my stories have received considerably fewer reviews than others of this magnitude. I A) may be mistaken about that and/or B) may be overestimating the quality, appeal, and readability of my own writing, I recognize. My own tastes and style are quite eclectic and very me, and on a more basic level there are many that don't like Slytherin!Harry or deplore H/G. This isn't so much a plea for more reviews as an expression of a bit of uncertainty and a request for patience. I realize that the story may go in directions that some of you, even those that have followed this from the start, are not pleased about. But do please give me a chance to make everything fit together. I know it may seem like I make this up as I go along, which is true to an extent (and there is some evidence of that in my earlier works - namely the hitherto-abandoned Harry/metamorphmagus storyline and his childhood friends), but I do have a fairly detailed plan of where I'm going with this. Have a little faith. Okay?

Anyway, the concerns that my reviewers seemed to have lead me to once again reiterate that Harry is fifteen years old, as are most of his classmates (Hermione's a bit older, but in some ways not as mature - in other ways she is more so than Harry). I never set out to write superpowered, insanely mature and perfect Harry that wasn't fouling things up because he was always in way over his head. I think that's utterly unrealistic. Yes, Harry has a destiny. Yes, he has some leadership potential. But he's still a child, by any real understanding of that word. And he's always been a combination of intensely emotional and analytical that leads him to make mistakes and then to seriously regret them.

If you can't buy Harry and Ginny's relationship, whatever stage it is at, right now, I can't really help you. A lot of AUs center around Harry having different romantic interests, thus changing his character and circumstances. This doesn't. The crucial change is the addition of Daphne Dressler, along with me playing merry hell with JKR's timeline and filling in gaps she so conveniently left open. I'm sure Ginny, Hermione, and Harry all seem whiny at times. But remember how old they are at this point? Are you really expecting me to believe

that teens of that age, regardless of background, aren't emotionally volatile and prone to errors of judgement? Come on now. As for why Harry and Ginny like each other so much, I've tried to provide in-story justification, but is anyone really going to deny that love, especially young love, is just weird and unpredictable? If they like each other, they like each other. How much, in what way, to what degree - that all depends on circumstance. But believe me, I know at this point that if the spark is there, it's there. If it isn't, it just isn't. Harry and Ginny have that spark. Everything else proceeds from there.

It wasn't intended this way, but the next chapter may help to sell GM Ginny to you, as it is written entirely from her perspective. Expect that within a day or two, as my beta has been making up for lost time.

So glad to be back. You guys are, for the most part, a great group of readers.

-Chris Widger

Chapter 17: A Day in the Life of Ginny Weasley

Ginny maneuvered through the bustling corridors of Hogwarts. It was just another ordinary day in her remarkably extraordinary life. She hummed a childhood tune to herself as she passed through packs of students and the occasional lone wolf like herself. She wondered if they weren't among friends by choice, by circumstance, or for some less pleasant reason. She could sympathize with that, as she saw a lonely looking First Year apprehensively pass her by. She'd been him, once, Sorted into the last House that anyone had expected, with no friends and seemingly no hope of her family ever understanding why she had become a Slytherin in a family of Gryffindors, or indeed ever coming to terms with it long enough to forgive her. It had never really been that bad, she knew now, but as a lost, frightened little mouse in this vast castle, in this strange new world she had dreamt of, coveted a place in, placed so many of her hopes and dreams upon, it had been easy to give in to despair.

That year felt like several lifetimes ago, and yet some of the events of the year were etched into her memory as if they had happened yesterday. Most of them were not the pleasant sort. And even those that were...well, Harry was a part of most of them.

Her Harry, she thought wistfully, allowing herself just a moment of self-pity. But no more.

In that terrible moment where Ginny's resolve and restraint had finally failed her, she had cast a spark into a volatile seething cauldron of grief, anger, horror, betrayal, and just a dash of hopeful nostalgia. She did not regret what she said. Her only remorse was that she had waited so long.

Ginny tried not to let tears well up in her eyes, tried to focus on the rhythm of her feet hitting the smoothed stone floor of the castle, on her winding, twisting path towards Sibil Trelawney's Divination class. It felt like another part of her innocence had died that terrible day, killed on impact when the back of her head met the dungeon wall. Her first year at Hogwarts had certainly forced her to grow up a lot faster than she might have wanted. It had been that night in the Forest, that battle for life and limb under the moonlit skies, when the

results of the damage to Daphne's twisted and shattered psyche had been made known to her, that her childhood had really ended. Molly Weasley had always been sure to warn her daughter that not everybody out in the world was a nice person, that for all the good people she would meet in her life, she would meet some that she had to stay well away from. Yet Ginny had on some level persisted in her belief that there was no evil, just the people who didn't care enough about everyone else. Riddle and the Diary had been an exception. But an exception extreme enough from her everyday experience that could still hold out hope in the fundamental decency of every person, without struggling to reconcile her belief with what she saw to be true.

What had happened in those impassioned and horrible moments between her and Harry were of no less importance. Ginny was not fool enough to assume that she had made the painful and complex transition to adulthood at the age of fourteen by a series of traumatic experiences. But at that moment, another of her childhood beliefs, her conviction in the reality of heroes, or special individuals that walked uncorrupted by the evil around them to work good, had been shattered. It was not that she hadn't grown out of her youthful idealization of Harry Potter, she had, but at the same time, that troubled, frighteningly powerful, scarred but somehow fundamentally good young man had still been a hero to her, a larger-than-life figure even though she could see his ugly failings and shortcomings straight in front of her. Her Hero. No longer.

Reaching the base of the North Tower, still lost in her thoughts and feeling rather alone, and more than a little pathetic, she nearly walked directly into Professor Trelawney, who was standing at the base of the ladder leading to the Divination classroom, looking quizzically at one of the moving portraits. Stopping short, she muttered a brief apology.

As if she had only then registered Ginny's presence, the willowy professor turned to her, searching her with eyes tucked behind thick spectacles. "Oh, Miss Weasley. Heavens, it's just you."

Ginny blinked. "Were you expecting someone else, Professor?"

"I have been feeling dark presences. There is danger in this castle. Threats yet unseen." She squinted, furrowing her brow in intense concentration. "Oh, it is just beyond my Sight," she said, sounding frustrated yet somehow resigned. A cynical part of Ginny wondered if she had gotten used to her complete lack of true prophetic ability. Ginny understood why Hermione couldn't stand Divination, or indeed Trelawney herself. Ginny did not terribly mind her; she was a kind woman, if clearly a bit off her rocker, and the class was interesting and pretty easy, if not terribly applicable to the real world. And who knew? Her Mum had once said something about a Seer in the Prewett family. Not that the youngest Weasley had manifested any prescient talents.

"Are you concerned, Professor?" Ginny asked. Somehow the idea of 'dark presences' prowling Hogwarts did not seem nearly as frightened as it ought to have been. Probably something to do with the number of times I or people close to me could have died these last few years.

"Well, of course I am a bit, dear." She smiled brightly. "That's why I've been sending some of the portraits near my classroom to keep an eye on things. Nothing to report, but I'm still waiting on Sir Cadogan to report back. He's been away longer than expected, but goodness am I glad to have him near my office these days."

Cadogan was a bit of a laughingstock, a wandering knight-errant with the wisdom of Don Quixote and the courage of Sipak the Spineless, the (in)famous goblin warlord who had surrendered his rebellious army upon seeing an arrow fly through the window of his command hut. Somehow, Ginny thought, Cadogan was still the perfect partner for Trelawney. Both well-intentioned. Both rather incompetent.

Ginny also realized that class had technically already started, although she could hardly be marked as tardy when the professor was standing in front of her. "Have you discussed these suspicions with the Headmaster?"

"Go to Dumbledore...oh no, I can't do that. What if I'm misreading the signs, and there is no danger. I almost lost my job a little while ago. I can't afford to be crying wolf." She spoke softly, hesitantly, with a candor that really was not to be expected given that Ginny hardly

knew the woman, many years her senior and an academic instructor. But why would Sybil Trelawney ever be expected to conform to common expectations of social relations?

"Well, it's probably good of you to make sure that all is well," Ginny said helpfully, smiling. "Professor, is it not time for class to begin?"

"Oh goodness!" Trelawney exclaimed, glancing at the battered pocket watch she drew from somewhere under her shawl. "It is. Well, you first, dear," she said, gesturing at the ladder.

Ginny completed what was at times the silliest leg of any journey she took through the mad castle, and found her seat. Anne Grunitch sat to her left, to her right sat the only person in the world capable of making Sybil Trelawney appear entirely sane by comparison, Luna Lovegood. Ginny's on-and-off childhood friend was, at this moment, glancing furtively around the room, and then marking a number of symbols on a small piece of paper before her. Ginny decided she'd rather not know.

After another class full of questionable logic, rampant speculation disguised as foreknowledge, and some rather wonderful anecdotes from Professor Trelawney (she probably had it meant it to be, but her story about the prophetess who had been certain that he had no future with the man she was destined to marry was pretty amusing), they were released. Ginny came up to Luna as she packed up her things. "Hi Luna. How are you?"

"Well, I would be better without the Nargle Infestation, but we can't have everything," she said vaguely. "Besides, life wouldn't be very interesting without the unexpected."

Ginny waited for Luna to finish. "I'm going to lunch. Do you want to come as well?"

"I'd be delighted to," she said, with surprising simplicity.

Ginny smiled. "Nargles won't be a problem?"

"They are scared of the goblets," she explained. "Pumpkin juice is poisonous."

Ginny nodded in forced understanding, and moved to clamber down the ladder.

"Miss Weasley?" Trelawney's voice called out. Ginny gestured to Luna to go down first, looking over at her professor. "Yes?"

"I...I want you to make sure you watch your back today. Today, more than most days." She looked very perturbed, and Ginny gave her a quizzical look, expecting a further explanation. "That's all," she said, and returned to clearing up her desk.

She's either completely mad or just a bit mad, Ginny decided. But maybe she did see something this time.

She nodded towards the frail Seer, who was no longer looking at her, and descended the ladder. She found herself on the landing, face to face with Sir Cadogan. "Good day, my fair maid," he said, bowing. "Is there danger about?"

"Depends on who you ask," Ginny said, completely seriously, as she hurried to catch up with Luna, who had begun skipping down the halls as she hummed a faint tune to herself.

"Glamour Charms!" Professor Filius Flitwick exclaimed excitedly, his squeaky voice echoing forth from a miniature frame. "A most useful form of magic, and at once one of the most common and most misunderstood charms in our society. I'm sure any number of you have heard of their use by older women to regain the youth they have left behind, or older men...no need to discriminate, of course," he said brightly, a mischievous glint in his eyes. "I am certainly aware that this is one of the most anticipated lessons after the Levitation Charm from your first year, but I do warn you: take great care in using them, especially upon your own person."

He hopped down off the box he stood on so as to be visible to the entire class, causing a few sniggers, which he either did not hear (he did seem a bit deaf at times) or politely ignored. "Now!" he said,

sounding as chipper as he had been in a while. "There are many uses of these charms. Obviously, one can use it to change one's own physical appearance, or that of others. Ah...there we go..." Flitwick placed his wand at his own temple, smiling brightly to reassure the students that nothing terrible was about to happen. To one who had seen as much as Ginny, it was oddly unnerving in and of itself. "Facio praestigia!"

Flitwick's figure became at once a blur, and then it extended upwards. The air cleared, and standing before them was an elongated and stretched Filius Flitwick, roughly anatomically proportional, standing about two meters high and looking quite pleased with himself. There were some bursts of applause from the students. Ginny, skepticism and cynicism almost second nature now, peered intently at the higher edges of Flitwick's form, and began to see ripples and colors washing in and out.

Flitwick found her instantly. "Miss Weasley, you appear to be rather intent on my new form. Care to explain what you have seen?"

Overcoming her surprise at being called upon, Ginny put her thoughts together. "The illusion is weaker at the edges. If I focus, I can see flaws in the glamour."

"Ah, excellent!" Flitwick said. He tapped his head again, and his figure grew even more. "Can any of you see anything now? Look carefully, use Miss Weasley's advice...yes, Mr. Corner?"

"I think I can see what Ginny was on about," the dark-haired Ravenclaw replied. "There's a...disruption, I suppose, for lack of a better word, visible if you focus your eyes on the edges of your profile. But if I look inwards, towards your face, for instance, the glamour appears quite strong."

"Well done both of you. Five points each to Slytherin and Ravenclaw," Flitwick said happily. Michael smiled in satisfaction, and Ginny felt a slight stirring of attraction. He was cute when he showed off his intelligence. Maybe, if she'd been a Gryffindor, that might have been enough for her, but though aesthetically appealing, he was not really her type.

Flitwick continued on, heedless of her girlish reflections. "Now, I suppose I need to restore a proper sense of proportion to this classroom. Alas." He tapped his forehead and his profile blurred once more, retracting down and fading out to reveal Flitwick at his normal stature. He jumped back onto his post. "Now, that was actually a rather poor use of a Glamour Charm, but I thought it would be a good introduction to what these charms can do. I could have, had I chosen, combined the incantation with a few other spells, or certain internal mantras that focus the mind and create a more lasting and convincing illusion. Nonetheless, it is likely that within a few minutes, the simple visual scrutiny that Miss Weasley subjected my new form to would have been sufficient to detect the flaws in the glamour."

He turned to the chalk-board, waving his wand to write the incantation in large, looping letters, as well as a few basic facts. Ginny did not bother taking these down. "So, as I have just demonstrated, it is generally a poor idea to use a glamour to disguise space that is in fact unoccupied. Had I, for instance, tried to walk through the door to my office, my upper half would appear to have passed through a solid wall. Hardly convincing, don't you think?"

There were some noises of assent, and Flitwick took that as his cue to continue. "Now, as I intimated earlier, the most common everyday use of these charms is to cover up or conceal unwanted features. As the illusion is less demanding and covers a smaller area, it is thus stronger. Also, few might scrutinize what they suspect might be a mole to the extent that they would yours truly if I was to suddenly rival Professor Dumbledore in stature."

Flitwick turned back to them. "Alright then, I suppose it is time to let you have a try of your own. Careful now. There is no particular wand movement required for this charm – though it would certainly be more effective to aim your wand in the proper direction. Now, to insure that any misfortune you encounter is none but your own doing, I would like each of you to practise on some of the objects on your desks, and then, if you feel so daring, your own limbs. We'll spare your faces to begin with...no need to send any of you to the Hospital Wing just yet," he chuckled merrily.

They began by changing the appearance of small objects, though some, including Ginny, had quickly graduated to more complex objects and effects. There was only so many times that turning a button into a coin (at least in appearance) or something similar could be that enthralling. The myriad uses of Glamour Charms were beginning to become apparent to her; such an effect was obviously a poor substitute for actual Transfiguration, but at long as the intended viewer was only looking, not touching, a good one could be just as effective. Finally bored with inanimate objects, about half-way through the class, as Flitwick circulated through their seats, checking their progress and offering suggestions, Ginny stuck out her own hand, then looked over to Luna, who was sitting beside her, either fascinated by the entire undertaking or doing an excellent job of acting interested. As she glanced over, it suddenly dawned on her that the face looking ever so curiously back at her was her own. Well...roughly.

"What do you think, Ginevra?" the faux Ginny asked, in a sing-song amusement that could only belong to one individual. I realize that it isn't perfect. Nose is too long. And I couldn't quite copy the Nargles..."

"Do I have nargles?" Ginny asked.

"We all do. There's one poking out, right next to your ear." She pointed, and Ginny, deciding to humor her, reached in the area. She pulled out some kind of green thread that had gotten tangled in her hair.

"This doesn't really look like anything but a loose thread, Luna. Probably from my scarf."

Luna shrugged, unconcerned. "Sometimes they look like that. Reckon they cast Glamours of their own?"

"Maybe they do," Ginny replied, wishing Luna would change the subject. Harry believe that Luna put up her eccentricities and belief in imaginary creatures as a front, to hide what was in fact a jumbled, complex mind, constantly receiving input from her rare telepathic or

empathic (Harry wasn't sure which) senses. Ginny was not entirely sure what to believe.

"He isn't always right, you know," she said casually. "He's all jumbled as well."

Trying to act unsurprised that Luna had just read her thoughts, Ginny made a non-committal noise.

"It's a game, Ginevra," she said solemnly. "It's all a game." Following that cryptic statement, she cancelled the Glamour on her own face, her ragged blonde hair and dazed blue eyes returning.

"I didn't even notice the glasses," Ginny admitted.

"Well, you weren't supposed to. That is the point of a Glamour, after all."

She paused, looking thoughtful. "Too bad I'm not related to you."

Ginny blinked. "Sorry?"

"Well, it makes the Glamour stronger. Blood Magic. You ought to be familiar with it. Well, if he told you. He would know, of course"

"He did," Ginny said uncertainly. "So it's easier to assume the form of a relative with a Glamour? I suppose that makes sense."

Luna stared. "If you say so." She glanced down at her bag, and then, seemingly uncaring if any one was watching her, put it onto her desk. She began searching through it, then pulled out a battered looking text. "Ah. The Moce didn't get to it."

"Don't you mean 'mice'?"

Luna looked back as if the connection had never occurred to her. "No, Ginevra."

Ginny glanced up. Flitwick was on the other side of the room, helping a couple of Slytherin boys that seemed to have botched their spell-

casting, warping their own features in the process. Henry Harper and Dean Acheson. She was not terribly familiar with either of them.

Luna had opened the text now, and was tracing lines with her fingers. The text was not English, she realized as she tried to read it, but it had Roman Letters. "Is that Latin?"

Luna nodded, flipping another page forward. "You read Latin?" She nodded again. "Father insisted. One day when the Wrackspurts destabilize the world, we will live in a primitive society and have to resort to a universal language. Because all knowledge prior to the 1700s will be destroyed, it will be Latin."

Unconcerned that just about nothing she had just said made the slightest bit of sense, Luna kept flipping through the book. "Oh, this one. Oh yes, this will be a good one."

"A good one for what?" Ginny asked.

"A bedtime story for Peter," she explained. "He is afraid of the history of wizards. So I found this. It is about Merlin. It's all rather fanciful, but very informative."

"Merlin," Ginny breathed.

"It is extraordinary, yes," Luna said, not looking up.

"No, I mean, it's an old book about the life of Merlin? Written in Latin?"

Luna nodded. "Galfridus Monemutensis wrote it."

Ginny frowned. "Sorry, who?"

There was a squeaky clearing of the throat behind them.

"Miss Weasley. Miss Lovegood. While I am sure that what you are doing is all very interesting, might I remind you that you are in class, and should be engaged only in activities relating to your instruction,"

Flitwick said, seeming to materialize out of nowhere. He did not look cross so much as exasperated.

"Sorry sir, Luna was just showing me a book she had out from the Library."

"Yes, I see that. Hmm...looks quite old. My curiosity overwhelms me, Miss Lovegood. What is it?"

"Well, it purports to be a compilation of medieval tales about Merlin," Luna said matter-of-factly.

"Purports to be?"

Luna looked back at the diminutive but veteran man. "Surely, Professor, you know that nothing is ever exactly what it seems to be. Especially books."

"Hmmm...yes, I have certainly learned that lesson over the years," Flitwick said, scratching thoughtfully at his beard. "But as fascinating as that is, I do insist you put it away."

Luna looked somewhat crestfallen, but did so.

Flitwick tapped Ginny on the shoulder with his wand. "Miss Weasley, if you could demonstrate your proficiency with Glamour Charms, I promise not to assume that you found my lesson to be unimportant, and thus unworthy of your attention, and not to apply the proper penalties for that sort of behavior."

"Thank you, Professor," Ginny said with real gratitude. She hardly needed detention on top of all her other problems. "Let me start with this quill..."

There were days where living in a converted dungeon, however furnished, made being a Slytherin just a rather depressing experience. Not that she would be in any other house, but Ginny had to admit that she liked the daylight that streamed through the great windows of Ravenclaw Tower and the twisting heights of Gryffindor Tower. The Slytherin Common Room really wasn't that objectionable at all; it was

often a very nice place to be, with polished marble walls, rich green and silver tapestries and carpets, comfortable furniture, and a great fireplace. But the rest of the dungeons were dank tunnels smelling of mildew and a few far worse things. She supposed it was all part of the ambience of the Slytherin dwelling-place – the forbidding, dark passages that would dissuade students from other Houses from actually exploring the dungeons long enough to find the entrance to the Slytherin dormitory. But unless you preferred cold, damp, and dark, it really was not one of the more enjoyable strolls through the great castle.

Ginny knew she had about an hour before dinner. Then she needed to write a letter to her parents, and another to Bill, sit down and finish her Transfiguration homework, study Potions with Anne and Melissa, and get herself a good night's sleep, allowing for the inevitable distractions that happened upon every student as he or she tried to have a productive evening. After Charms, she had decided to head back to her room to lie down for a bit. She had been feeling a bit lightheaded. That tended to happen when she was stressed and did not eat as much as she should. As she walked through the underground corridors, her shoes slapping softly against the unyielding floor, she spied a figure ahead of her as she entered into a wide junction which divided two routes, one to the Slytherin Common Room, one to the lower dungeons. He was dressed in bright red, tall and athletic in build. Before she could begin to wonder why an Auror was wandering around the dungeons, she saw a shimmer to her left, and what had appeared to be a solid wall seemed to fade and dematerialize, as someone took advantage of the hidden staircase it concealed. The new figure stepped through the hazy image of the wall and into her view. It was Harry. Ginny's heart immediately sped up, to her annoyance. "Hi," she said, without thinking.

Harry glanced at her, surprise in those brilliant green eyes tucked behind slender frames. "Hi. Ginny," he said, almost as if he had just realized who was standing before him. He sucked in a deep breath. "How are you?"

"Been better," she admitted, stopping now to look at him. This was not the first time they had talked since it had happened. But this was possibly the first time they had been alone when they interacted. It

was horrendously awkward, as Ginny tried to figure out what she should be feeling, and Harry tried to decide what he should say. "And yourself?"

"Alright, all things considered...I suppose," he corrected himself, as if not to give her the impression that his life was going well at all after what he had done to her. Stupid prat, she thought. "I...um, well, what are you doing down here?"

"Going back to my room. I'm feeling a bit peakish," she admitted. "Just need a lie-down."

"Sounds like a good idea. I was...I was just going to retrieve a few books I need to work with. Um...Ginny?" If it were possible, he now looked even more uncomfortable.

"Yes, Harry?" she answered, keeping her voice level and relatively emotionless, just as the boy standing in front of her had taught her. It definitely had the effect of unnerving him. Amazingly, this future leader of the wizarding world was reduced to a hesitant mess before a red-headed girl a year and several inches his junior. Okay, now I'm being unfair, she thought. It's me that Harry's struggling to find words for, and that's because of what he put me through. He's an arrogant prat, but he's got a conscience. Stop Torturing Him.

Harry eventually got himself together. "Do you want...do you want to meet up at Hogsmeade, at some point. Just...have a butterbeer. Talk about things. Try...well, try to understand one another. Just once, if you are willing..."

Ginny's sense of charity was beaten by sarcasm that was more than a little protective in nature. "Are you asking me out on a date?"

Harry stared for a moment. "No...well, I suppose, if you want to put it that way. I don't...I don't know what I want, or what is right for me...right now. I don't...I don't want to..."

"Harry," she said softly, taking a few steps toward him. "I would like a chance to talk to you. That sounds like a very good idea." She wasn't

entirely sure of what she was saying, or how comfortable she was with the idea, but enough of her wanted it that it came out anyway.

Harry gave her a small smile, and for that moment, all of the expectations, trauma, anxiety, and pressure that weighed so heavily on both of them melted away. For that short moment, they were just a fifteen-year old boy and a fourteen-year old girl, awkwardly dancing the dance of young romance. Well, after a fashion.

Then Ginny saw something, and her instincts kicked in. "Down!" she cried, running forward and pushing Harry to the side. A curse flashed between them, right where Harry's head had been, nicking her right shoulder, though she scarcely realized it at the time. Harry dropped and rolled, wand sailing free of its holster into his right hand, and Ginny drew hers from her robes. Another curse lashed out from the darkness, shattering stone a few inches from Harry's left leg. And it was darkness; a 10 square meter section of corridor was completely blacked out, and more than would have been the case if the torches had simply been extinguished. The effect was clearly magical.

As she glanced quickly at Harry, her eyes asking what she should do, a screaming red-robed figure raced out of the darkness, firing curses wildly. Harry deflected a couple that came too close, firing back his own Blasting and Stunning hexes, and Ginny added a few of her own. They were on target, but absorbed by the bluish-purple sheen of a powerful Servos shield. The return fire nearly took Harry's legs off, blasting a crater in the wall behind them. Another spell came her way, which she partially deflected while sidestepping, so that the force that got through only pushed her back a few steps. Harry had begun another attack, trying to overwhelm the Servos shield with a barrage of low-powered hexes, which would weaken the barrier while giving it little energy to feed a retaliatory spell. "Incarcerous!" she cried.

On its own, such a spell would have been easily defended, but since their attacker was sufficiently occupied by Harry's attacks, he had no choice but to dodge physically. That did not quite work, as a rope caught his left ankle, wrecking his balance and sending him spinning towards the floor. His concentration broken, he took Harry's next curse right in the center of mass, and was hurled backwards into the unnatural darkness. Harry and Ginny both hurried forward, as they

heard a raspy "Avada...kedavra..." and saw a flash of sickly green light.

"Disperso!" Harry cried, and the darkness glowed white before it began to dissipate. Ginny could hear footsteps approaching as she cast an Illumination Charm. She braced herself, expecting to see a dead body, as the Killing Curse had certainly appeared to be self-directed. It was worse.

A middle-aged man sat staring out at them with glassy eyes, drooling, mumbling and limply holding an ebony wand, as if he'd never seen anything like it in his life.

"Expelliarmus." The wand flew from their attacker's unresisting grasp and into Harry's left hand. "Oh Merlin," he breathed.

"Who is it?" Ginny asked, cautiously approaching. The man had strange dark blotches all over his face, which was otherwise deathly pale. His eyes stared out blindly, his quivering mouth spewing words incoherently.

"I obey...o Merlin...I'm...what's this now? Amelia, Amelia, where are you? I...I'm lost...I did...what you said...where...what am...you...stop there...no you," he babbled.

"His name is James Dawlish, and he used to be one of Fudge's top Aurors," Harry said quietly.

The source of the approaching footsteps arrived. "Who is there?" Snape's cold voice demanded. "What is going on? Tell me. Now!"

"We've dealt with it, Professor," Harry said, raising his voice a bit. "It's over."

Snape came up alongside them, looking down at the quaking mess on the floor. "Dawlish?" he exclaimed in disbelief.

"What's left of him," Harry breathed.

Snape turned to him and Ginny. "Explain."

"He attacked us. We fought him off, and took him down, and then I think he tried to kill himself," Harry explained, still breathing heavily.

"How?"

"Killing Curse. It went wrong."

"Poor bastard," Snape said, sounding almost genuine.

Ginny shook her head. "I don't understand. Why is he like this? What's happened to him?"

More footsteps were coming. Dawlish continued to mumble words, still unmoving. Snape looked at her, a darkness in his eyes she'd scarcely seen. "Do you understand what the Killing Curse is meant to do, Miss Weasley. How it achieves its purpose, when properly executed?"

Ginny shook her head.

"It destroys the magical core," Harry explained. "And when it's done that, it rips out...well, what can best be described as the victim witch or wizard's soul...it destroys what makes each of us who we are, and leaves the body an empty shell. You know that saying, 'the eyes are the window to the soul?' Well, there might be some truth to it, but it originated from the effects of the Killing Curse. Those glassy, lifeless eyes. Portals into a void where the soul once was."

"How...artistic, Potter," Snape said. "But essentially accurate. Miss Weasley, the most dangerous thing a wizard can do is attempt to kill himself with his own magic. The effect of magic, especially the effect of magic of the sort of the Unforgivable Curses, is about conviction. At some fundamental, visceral level, we always want to survive. It is rare that a wizard or witch has the conviction to end his or her life by magical means. When such conviction is lacking, but the spell is successful, well...only part of the process is accomplished."

"He destroyed part of his own soul," Ginny realized in horror. "But only part. And some of him is still in there." Horror overwhelmed her mind as she contemplated the ramifications of such an occurrence."

"In some ways, his fate is almost worse than one that has been Kissed by a Dementor," Snape said coldly. "Almost."

Harry nodded in sudden understanding. "Because his magical core has also been damaged - He's going to die, isn't he?"

"Very soon," Snape said. "He's got an hour at most. Move him to my office. Hurry."

Harry looked at Ginny, and she nodded. He cast a Levitation Spell, a sick reflection of the first time either of them had learned it in Charms class First Year. Snape turned on his heels and led the way, Ginny following, Harry moving behind the still whispering Dawlish.

Snape opened his door with a complex wand movement and Summoned a blanket, on which Harry laid their attacker. Ginny stood at the doorway, uncomprehending, as Snape began to select ingredients. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"Putting him out of his misery, in the kindest way I can. A Killing Curse won't even work on him now. Short of bodily trauma, there is nothing I can do to speed this up."

There was a knock on the door. "Go away!" Snape hissed.

"Severus?" the voice of Albus Dumbledore answered.

"Enter," Snape called out, returning to his work. The door swung inward, nearly hitting Ginny, who stared up blankly at the Headmaster as he ducked to enter the office. He stared at the scene before him.

"It is as I feared, then?"

"I'm preparing a Draft of Release as we speak. It's the best thing we can do at this point," Snape told him.

Dumbledore turned to Ginny, then Harry. "You are uninjured?"

"Fine," Harry breathed. "Just fine. I wasn't expecting that."

"No, I daresay you would not have been," Dumbledore said softly. "And you, Miss Weasley?"

Ginny didn't answer for a moment. "Ginny?" Harry asked.

"I'm alright," she said in a small voice. "Just...well..."

The Headmaster nodded, giving her a pat on the shoulder as he moved past. He looked down at the dying man. "It should not have been like this, James. It should never have come to this."

"Amelia..." Dawlish gasped. "Amelia..."

"Who's Amelia?" Ginny asked.

"His late wife. She died, four years ago. An accident."

Ginny's heart sank. "He doesn't remember, does he?"

Dumbledore shook his head, and then knelt by the stricken man. "James, boy, it's Albus. You are going to be fine. It will all be well in time."

Ginny tore herself away from the scene before her. It was too much. She felt a hand on her shoulder. It was Harry, was now standing closer, looking at her with great concern. "You're hurt."

"No, I'm..." she stopped, seeing the crimson slick on Harry's hand as he pulled it away. "Oh."

"It's alright," Harry said. "I...I've been practicing some basic healing spells. Only done cuts and bruises at this point. It doesn't look that deep."

It occurred to Ginny that she could just go to Madam Pomfrey, but there was something very appropriate about this.

Harry took a deep breath. "Do you trust me?"

Oh Gods. What a question, she thought. But she said:

"Yes."

Harry gave her a quick smile, and whispered a few words. She felt her shoulder flash hot, stinging a bit, and winced. Then it was gone. She dabbed at the blood with the fabric of her torn robes. The wound was pinkish, but otherwise gone. "Good job," she said.

"Thank you for getting me out of the way back there," he said.

"You're welcome."

She suddenly became aware that her hand was in his, and she stared back into those twin pools of emerald green, unsure of how she'd gotten here, or what she should, or could, do now.

There was a rattling cough from Dawlish that shattered the moment. They both turned back. Snape was kneeling over him, a partially empty bottle of something in his hand, some of the contents pooling on Dawlish's chin and speckling his stubble. On the other side, Dumbledore's wand was against the man's temple. A small bowl sat to the side, its contents a shining milky grey. Memories. Dawlish's memories, taken from him at the moment of his death. Dawlish went limp, his breathing slowing. Harry's arm was now around her shoulders. She really didn't mind.

Dumbledore finished his gruesome task, the lines on his face making him look positively ancient. "I know, Miss Weasley," he said, not looking at her. "It is a terrible thing to do. But the least we can do is understand what happened. I do not do what I do lightly."

"I understand," she said quietly.

"He's almost gone, Headmaster," Snape said gravely. "A minute at most."

"Then he shall have a minute of peace, Severus."

The four of them waited, silent, with only their soft exhalations, the bubbling of a cauldron, and the shaking, gasping Dawlish breaking the silence. Finally, with a death rattle, he was gone.

Ginny felt a squeeze from Harry's arm, and decided at once that she liked it very much. She buried herself in her friend's chest, sobbing raggedly. His arms closed around her with comforting warmth. Despite everything, she felt safe at last.

Ginny took a deep breath as she took in her surroundings. She had not been in Dumbledore's Office before, although she had heard stories from Harry and Hermione. A multi-level cross between a library, a sitting room, and a laboratory, with a large oaken desk at the center, it was filled with all manner of trinkets, magical objects, books, and papers, in a disorganized yet somehow elegant disarray. Then there was the spectacular plumage of Dumbledore's Phoenix, Fawkes, who was perched on a stand behind the desk, imperiously surveying the intruders, the light of dozens of candles glinting off him in a dazzling display of light and color. And to top off the visual extravaganza, the walls were lined with portraits – former headmasters and headmistresses (there had been a few, she understood). All of them seemed to be looking right at her, even though a second glance showed they hardly noticed her presence, or if they did, it did not concern them.

So overwhelmed was she that she did not at first realize that Dumbledore had spoken. He was now looking at her, concern in his kind eyes. Ginny felt very small, in a way she had not since she had gone with her father to the Ministry at the age of eight. She had been so overwhelmed by the bustling of the Muggle city, and then awestruck by the routine wonder of the Ministry building itself. She felt anything but a Slytherin at that moment.

"I...I'm sorry, I didn't hear you," Ginny said haltingly.

"I merely asked if you wished to remain here for what may be a discussion of a...rather heavy sort," Dumbledore told her. "Harry has given his permission for you to remain."

Ginny was surprised, and glanced over at her...friend, she decided she would call him for now. Her friend, standing a few feet from where she was sitting on a worn wooden chair, gave her a look that was probably meant to be reassuring, but there was so little emotion in it that Ginny nearly felt more uneasy. What she thought she saw in those eyes, though, was the sentiment: I trust you. Trusted her with what was the question. She braced herself, deciding that she would not feel apart any further, and nodded. "Yes. Yes, I want to stay."

Dumbledore was silent for a moment. Snape was looking at her with something that might have been a glimmer of concern. Maybe. His face was more impassive than Harry's. Ginny felt herself tensing, waiting what felt like an eternity for the Headmaster's reply. "Very well," he said at last.

He turned toward Harry, his gaze finally leaving her as he sat down behind his desk, laying his hands on his before him on the desk. "I would ask how you were, if I expected to get an honest response. It has been some time since we spoke, Harry, and I am concerned that you no longer trust me as you once did."

Ginny saw Harry bristle ever so slightly at the insinuation. "I'm not sure I understand, Professor."

Dumbledore sighed slightly. "Harry, I'm quite certain you understand just fine. I know that you have been involved in certain affairs that are, strictly speaking, none of my concern. But it is rather distressing to learn of your involvement in a coup by top members of the Ministry from less direct and personal sources."

"I'm...I didn't think you would approve."

"You thought correctly," Dumbledore said. "However, my approval and the actions I might choose to take are rather different things. I have lived a long time, Harry, and on many occasions I have had to do things I might find...distasteful in order to...to serve the greater good," he finished. There was something about the way he said those last five words, Ginny thought. A sort of wistful echo, as if he was quoting someone else, and at the same time wishing that he was not.

Harry was looking more uncomfortable by the minute. "Perhaps I erred in not consulting you."

"Potter," hissed Snape. "For Merlin's sake, you are fifteen years old. Stop speaking like a lawyer."

Harry threw an annoyed glance at Snape. Dumbledore raised his hands. "While I share the sentiment of Severus' comment, they are your words, and it means a great deal for me to be hearing them."

"Are you asking me if I regret my decision?" Harry asked. "If I think that I made the wrong choice. Because I don't. I did what needed to be done. I did what I could to put needed things into motion, to unite a pair of mutual associates that might otherwise want nothing to do with one another."

"You speak of Rufus and Aiden, I presume." Harry nodded. "Strange bedfellows indeed. I am aware, to the best of my knowledge, of the extent and nature of your role. I am not without my sources of information within both parties, and those resources could be put at your disposal if you were to ask me for help."

"What's done is done. I think the Ministry's better off." Sometimes Harry sounded ridiculously older than his years, and not necessarily in a good way.

"Perhaps," Dumbledore said, sounding unconvinced. "There is a great deal of work left to be done, and not merely in doing what Cornelius had left neglected. Surely you understand that for Scrimgeour's actions to be acceptable, those of Cornelius must be brought to light. And while our former Minister had fewer allies than he would have liked, he was not lacking in that regard. You and your allies have cracked a dragon's egg, Harry, and I do wonder if you have properly contemplated what may emerge."

"I trust that those now in power will do what is needed," Harry replied evenly. Dumbledore might have been trying to provoke some sort of emotional response from him, but Harry was not giving him the satisfaction. At least, that's probably how Harry was thinking of it,

Ginny mused. What in a paranoid state of mind Harry might have perceived as emotional manipulation, Ginny saw from where she was standing a effort to reach out, to communicate with Harry the person, not Harry the neophyte politician.

"Mmm," Dumbledore said non-committally. "There is one further matter on this subject that I wish to discuss. You are probably not aware, but I did for a time consider severe disciplinary action against yourself, Miss Greengrass, Mr. Nott, and Miss Lovegood. In the end, I decided that, as much as I found your actions appalling and concerning, I would treat you as the children that you all try so hard not to be at times. That, and while I had a chance to stop you, I declined to do so. I will allow to live with the consequences of your actions."

Harry looked pained, and possibly a little embarrassed. "I regret not so much what we did as how we did it. Umbridge had to be dealt with. But..."

"But...?"

"Attacking her was unacceptable and inappropriate. As little respect as I have for the woman herself, she remains a figure of authority, and there were other ways to have her neutralized. I should not...I should have taken your presence there as a sign of approval."

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows. "No, I daresay you shouldn't. If I had known what would ensue, I might not have stepped aside. Harry, those are perhaps not the words I might have chosen, but I appreciate the sentiment. And I am relieved that you have, upon further reflection, come to understand how reckless and dangerous your actions were. There have been three incidents in the history of this school in which pupils have magically assaulted faculty, with the result of two deaths and two expulsions. Because of the extenuating circumstances, you will not join them. But I will not tolerate that manner of behavior, under any circumstances, in the future. Do you understand, Mr. Potter? I will be calling in the others in their turn, but I wished to discuss this with you first."

"You are far too kind, Headmaster," Snape said, anger pouring through his words. "There is arrogance and hubris. And then there is complete and utter disregard for order, authority, and the safety of everyone in this castle. Your actions, and those of your housemates, represent the latter. Do not doubt that I found Dolores as foul and loathsome a creature as you. But you are lucky not to have been arrested, let alone expelled, especially considering your actions when Fudge attempted to arrest Dressler. I'm sure it galled you and your compatriots to have your moment of glory taken by men like Scrimgeour and Greengrass. But that is no excuse to recreate a violent and disruptive political action within the walls of this castle for your own ego gratification."

"Professor, I..."

"Don't start, Potter," Snape hissed. "I don't want to hear your excuses, your groveling, or your rationalizing. I merely want to know that you will not do anything like this again. Certainly not without the knowledge of your Headmaster and Head of House. I understand your desire to prove yourself. But there are proper actions that can be taken in the service of that goal, and there are improper ones."

Harry took the withering rebuke fairly well, although his eyes were shining with tears and roiling emotion. Ginny had noticed a slight tremor throughout the room that had vibrated some of the glass instruments on Dumbledore's bookshelves. He was barely keeping it in.

"Severus, that was unnecessary-"

"I disagree," Snape bite back. "Your reluctance to hurt the boy's feelings may be laudable, but it is also dangerous and irresponsible."

"Leave him alone."

Snape swung around, glaring daggers into Ginny's soul. "Excuse me, Weasley?"

Ginny stood up straight, meeting his gaze with her own. "He's had enough. Leave him."

"Ginny, don't-" Harry began.

Ginny waved him off. "With all due respect, Professor, you have gotten your point across. Further abuse will serve no useful purpose."

Snape's eyebrow rose. Words pierced her mind. Stunning loyalty to an abusi...

"Severus! ENOUGH!" Dumbledore's voice thundered. "I will not have you intimidating your students, and certainly not in my office."

Snape took in a shuddering breath. "My apologies, Headmaster. I'm afraid I allowed my emotions to get the better of me."

"It is not to me that you should be apologizing, Severus."

Harry's eyes burned with rage as he realized what had happened, and he took a step closer to her.

"Mr. Potter. Professor Snape. You will stop this immediately," Dumbledore said, more softly but somehow with no less authority. "Miss Weasley, are you alright?"

"Fine," Ginny said, though she was more than a little shaken. She sat down, suddenly regretting her decision to stay for this.

Dumbledore breathed audibly. "We will return to this subject, later, Severus. When tempers have cooled...Mr. Potter, tell me about your dreams."

Harry seemed to jerk with surprise. "My...dreams, sir?" He reddened slightly.

Dumbledore's eyes showed a little bit of mirth. "Only those dreams that might be considered unusual for one of your age to be having, Mr. Potter. Dreams involving Lord Voldemort. He has reached out to you in the past months, has he not? Visions, words, emotions that are not yours?"

"Yes," Harry said. Ginny was startled. The time period described reached back to when they had been together, but she had heard nothing of this.

"On occasion. I've done my best to stop him. To be honest, I don't think he's really tried that hard," Harry said, with (in Ginny's opinion) astounding levity for someone whose thoughts were being probed by He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.

Snape looked like he was refraining from saying something rather nasty. Dumbledore gave him a look to encourage his restraint.

"And what has been the dominant thought or question? Why is he doing this, Harry?" Dumbledore asked slowly, carefully.

"Just...just one question, over and over, in different forms but it all boils down to: Who are you, Harry Potter?"

"Who indeed," Dumbledore replied. "I suspected as much, but as was the case before, it has been good to hear this from you. I am pleased you have spoken to Severus, who brought this to my attention. Though if I recall correctly, that was some time ago."

"About two months," Harry confirmed. "Things have been...complicated. I haven't actually been sleeping that much, and Voldemort has not really attempted to enter my mind while I have been conscious."

"Yes, I suspect he is avoiding excessive contact."

"Because he's opening a door, a door than can be stepped through in either direction." Harry looked like he had been aching to say that.

"Well put, although I would encourage you not to underestimate his mental capacities. Tom remains the most talented individual in mental magic that I have ever met. Nonetheless, he is cautious. You have continued your Occlumency exercises? Do you think it possible that further practice with Professor Snape would be helpful?"

"I have," Harry replied. "And with all due respect, I don't know. I'm fairly certain at this point I can keep Voldemort out of certain memories. But keeping out of my mind entirely is another matter."

"Yes, your connection," Dumbledore said, looking at Harry's scar. "It is possible that further Occlumency training will not be of use, but nonetheless, I would ask you to consider it. Severus, I hope you would be willing?"

Snape looked surprisingly acquiescent. "If Potter gives me his best efforts, I am willing to work further with him."

"Then I suggest that you investigate this, and try to keep personal matters outside of this."

Both nodded. While Harry and Snape certainly had their moments of antagonism, there was still a degree of respect and mutual appreciation within their relationship. Both knew what was at stake. Ginny imagined things would not have been so easy, even given the circumstances, if Harry wasn't also a member of Snape's House.

"Professor, you think that Dawlish was sent by him, don't you?" Harry asked after a pause. "You think he is testing me."

"As he was last year, Harry," Dumbledore replied. He smiled mirthlessly. "You are clearly as much of an enigma to him as you are to everyone else. He wants to know what you are capable of. He is still regaining his power. And you are still growing in power. You have noticed it, haven't you? That with your own physical maturation, your powers have become more focused, more...accessible."

Harry glanced a bit embarrassedly at Ginny. It was kind of adorable, she thought, his being bashful at discussing puberty in front of her when he was so willing to talk high politics as a fifteen-year old. "I...yes. Yes, they have, I've noticed. It has been...gradual, almost imperceptible at times."

"I daresay that we were spared a rather severe burst of accidental magic a short time ago because of it, for which I am grateful. Nothing in here is really irreplaceable. Well, perhaps nothing but Fawkes, my

dear bird," he said, glancing affectionately at the Phoenix. "But that does not make it easy to reacquire."

"Thank goodness for small favors," Snape mumbled under his breath.

"Regardless, yes, you have ferreted out the connection that I suspect. You have seen James before, haven't you, Harry? How did your observations of him then compared to today."

"Dawlish was not a zealot. I never liked him. But I would not say that he was mad."

"Yes. I believe that to have been a recent development. Miss Weasley, since you have been so patient, I would like to ask you to describe James as you saw him."

Ginny started a bit, and summoned the memories. "He was...practically frothing at the mouth...his eyes," she whispered, looking back in her mind's eyes. "There was madness in them. Desperation. Fear."

Dumbledore nodded. "That confirms what I suspected."

"Which was, Headmaster?" Snape asked, though it seemed he might already have known the answer.

"His madness was induced. I cannot say for certain how, but there were burst blood vessels under his eyes."

"Signs of Cruciatus, then," Snape said.

"I suspect it was combined with some sort of illusion involving his wife, given what he said before he died. And his suicidal tendencies."

"Oh gods," Ginny said, her revulsion from earlier returning.

She felt a hand on her shoulder. Harry again. "It's over now," he said gravely. "For everyone. Is there any way to find out how this happened?"

"I can put out inquiries," Snape said. "But I would not expect much. It may be worth paying a visit to his home."

Dumbledore nodded. "Please, keep me informed." He sighed. "I believe that is quite enough for now, though do not be surprised if you hear from me in the near future. Miss Weasley, Mister Potter, you may go."

Harry nodded curtly. Ginny merely looked warily up at Dumbledore.

They both exited, taking the spiral staircase down to a hidden door, which opened as they approached. At once, they found themselves in a wood-lined corridor. Ginny realized she was shaking, and fought to control it. "I'm sorry you had to see that," Harry said.

"Don't be," she replied, not looking at him. She began walking, not caring if he followed. She badly needed that nap.

Just another day in the life...

A/N: So, yes. A chapter entirely through the eyes of Ginny Weasley. Given that this is true, it seems pertinent to remind you, my readers, of a few things: 1) Ginny reads Harry like a book. Or so she thinks. She may also be exaggerating his visible lack of composure because she knows what is going on inside his head. Well, she thinks she knows - that's the beauty of the unreliable narrator, and I use it often. Keep that in mind. 2) Ginny is fourteen years old, and her mind is a confused mess right now. She's extremely emotional, more so than she often has been in the past since her first months at Hogwarts. Don't take that as an indication of her character's weakness or inability to mature. It's a gradual process. I tend to write from the perspective of given characters when the strain is starting to get to them, because I think it's more interesting that way. 3) This chapter was called 'A Day in the Life...' rather ironically - this is plainly not an incredible typical day. Also, she was incredibly disturbed by what happened to Dawlish. And if you think about it hard enough, you should be too.

I really find it odd that people really would prefer that I pair Harry with Daphne Greengrass or Fleur Delacour, when they are, in the opinion of me, the author, just as flawed and weak.

I hate feeling like I have to head off criticism, but I feel it's particularly necessary for this chapter. I really don't want to see the rather predictable knee-jerk accusations that Harry is being pathetic or weak in front of Snape and Dumbledore. First off, he respects both of them. Greatly. Certainly not personally, in the case of Snape (that remains to be seen with Dumbledore), but as authority figures and mentors - which is actually a rather mature attitude to take. So when they tell him he's screwed up, he listens. Not listening has gotten Harry in a world of hurt in the past. He may have swung back too far in the opposite direction, but let's remember his age again, shall we? The lesson that Snape was teaching Harry is an important one - there are rules in this society, and that is only more true within the sort of Pureblood circles that Harry is trying to gain influence in. It was as satisfying to Harry as it was to us to see Dolores given her just due. But that doesn't make it a good move. Harry's chances to show leadership will come, especially in the next book, as he has to pull together all the lessons he's been learning so far and finally take action before it is too late. But he is still learning. Plus, he stood his ground on his involvement in the coup. That's pretty ballsy right there, and shows Harry does, even in a time of emotional uncertainty, possess a fierce conviction that he is, on the whole, doing the right thing.

Anyway, with that out of the way, there are a few things that I have altered a bit during my long hiatus. Nothing enormous within the actual story, but certain assertions of mine made in the author's notes, especially relating to LGBT relationships, and (though they are not necessarily connected) the character of Draco are pretty much to be considered null and void. While the main timeline and events of the story remain the same, certain details are going to be tweaked significantly. I'm also using the "you didn't hear about this because so-bloody-much was happening, but it did happen" to keep a few plot threads in the story that might otherwise have fallen out. They'll make sense, I promise.

I'll try not to do anything to contradict what is already written (and you can call me out on that if I botch it), with one exception. If you remember, back in *Darkness Rising*, at the Quidditch World Cup, Harry, Daphne, and the Greengrasses had a discussion in which Aiden pledged his loyalty to Harry (a move that has been absolutely crucial, as Harry is not in a position to be as politically proactive as he'd like to be.) I'll include all of the changed text right here, and I've already changed the text in the story itself. It won't effect anything that has already happened, but may have significant future importance.

Aiden Speaking:

"I have conducted extensive studies of Wizarding history, for history tends to repeat itself, for similar cases, where an infant such as yourself was responsible for some kind of extraordinarily important historical event. And I found exactly one case. Do you know what it was?"

"Merlin," his guardian said. Then, he realized that it wasn't an exclamation. It was the answer to the question. Confirming his suspicions, Daphne continued. "During the first ten years of his life, Merlin, as an extremely powerful Wizarding child in a world where magical and Muggle were intermingled in a tenuous coexistence, was repeatedly targeted in his youth by enemies of his grandfather, a minor king of Demetia. He survived three separate assassination attempts on his own, and would eventually grow to become the greatest wizard in history." Harry suspected that Daphne had been doing similar reading, accounting for her detailed recollection.

"Daphne omits the most intriguing parts of the stories," Aiden said. "Specifically, those that link one of those failed attempts to the fall of Vortigern, and the subsequent war with the Saxons, all of which, of course, lead to the establishment of a kingdom in the west of England, a kingdom that legend says was ruled by a king named Arthur. And at his side..."

"The wizard Merlin," Harry answered. He struggled to recall what he knew of the 'historical' Merlin - well, to the extent that such a person could be said with any certainty to have existed.

His guardian looked skeptical. "Aiden, even if you give credence to those legends - and that is what they are - you have to extrapolate a fair bit to reach that kind of conclusion."

Aiden smiled. "Do I? Was it not Vortigern who ordered the attempt on the infant Merlin, fearing that his royal blood combined with magical power might threaten what some saw as an illegitimate crown, after the mysterious death of his brother Constans?"

Harry was a bit lost now. And so, it seemed, was his guardian.

As far as Harry knew, the story of Merlin, though it shared a few similarities to the tale of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table told to young Muggle children, was in fact much different from that legend. Merlin was far more than simply an advisor to the Muggle King – he exercised power and even dominion, to some extent, from England to Japan. Only twenty years before his death, he acted as a private tutor for four of the most important wizards and witches in Wizarding history: Godric Gryffindor, Salazar Slytherin, Helga Hufflepuff, and Rowena Ravenclaw. The founding of Hogwarts forever transformed Wizarding education, as it moved from private tutoring that few could afford to a large boarding school setup. The Beauxbatons Academy, Durmstrang, and around a dozen other magical schools were all established in the following one hundred years.

"Aiden, are you suggesting that the attempt on the infant Merlin led to the fall of Vortigern? And with him the native British to the Saxon settlers?"

"Quite possibly," he said, a certain deal of enthusiasm in his voice. "And I have uncovered possible evidence that makes me believe all the stronger that Merlin was, from his infancy to his death, a consummate King-Maker and King-Breaker. A power broker of untold influence and might within both the wizarding and Muggle worlds, even when the two were inseparable, as they once were."

Sorry about that.

Next chapter is underway, but unfortunately you'll have to wait a bit longer this time. Not too long. I promise. It features more of Blaise, more of Draco, more of Rufus, and, after a bit of an absence, more of Voldemort. (The dreams never really went away. They just aren't quite as important as they were in canon - Well, yet.) Chapter after that will be full of much politicking, and Harry finally making a little progress with Purebloods lacking an affinity with Slytherin. And then the Endgame. After that? Canon (finally) goes out the window. Completely. *rubs hands together in excitement*

-Chris Widger

Chapter 18: The 'Lesser' Things

Harry stood back and let his eyes take in the complex and chaotic scene before him. Leaning against the cool walls of the Room of Requirement, he tried to see what progress the Defense Association had made over the last few weeks. Attendance remained decent,, and, more importantly, while neither Remus nor Dumbledore had specifically approved the existence of the organization, no attempt been made to shut it down. Hermione suggested that the reason for this was that the D.A. represented a rather unprecedented example of student-led inter-house cooperation. Although Harry gave some credence to that argument, it also was plain to him that Dumbledore was not going to object to the students under his watch being as prepared as they could be should the worst come. While the Siege of Hogwarts could at times seem a part of ancient history, it more properly served as a reminder that the castle was not the impregnable sanctuary that so many thought it was.

And it was only a matter of time before these exercises became all the more important. It was not as though he or anyone else had forgotten the raid on Hogsmeade. While by some miracle no students had been killed, and the Death Eaters were more set on rampant property destruction, and, well, Harry's own life, the events of that day had stayed with the students that had lived through it. The younger students were finally learning that the D.A. meetings were not a game where the loser suffered nothing more than a blow to their pride. It was not life or death...yet. It was impossible to know when that might change.

A few students had been withdrawn from school, but, mercifully, fewer than Harry anticipated. The reality was that most of the parents of magical families (especially the Light ones) thought Hogwarts to be the safest location for their children in Wizarding Britain, and especially under the stewardship of the venerable Dumbledore. And, inevitably, the Muggle families knew little of what had transpired in the past few years, bringing the magical community to the brink of outright war. It was Hermione's eagerness to engage her family with the wizarding world, an enthusiasm in these troubled times that not too many Muggleborns seemed to share, at least to such a degree,

that had led to their attempt to withdraw her from school. In end, she was still here.

Turning back to the scene before him, he watched Hermione as she engaged in a rapid and fierce duel with Daphne Greengrass, the closest thing she had to a Slytherin counterpart in bookishness and raw intelligence, as well as – though Daphne would vociferously deny it – idealism. Oh, Daphne had tried from the start of their first year to project an image of the preternaturally mature and composed cynic. And, for some time, Harry had even bought into it. But it had become increasingly obvious, as their interactions became less limited, that Daphne had practically scripted them in advance. Ultimately, she was as much a fallible fifteen years old as he was.

Her idealism took different forms, represented best by her unfailing faith in tradition and the universal utility of iconic Slytherin values such as rhetoric, cunning, and manipulation, in place of the Gryffindor's pacifistic leanings and never-ending desire to find a majority of good in the world. To Harry, his friends' commitments to abstract moral concepts (or lack of them, in Daphne's case), were, at their core, just two sides of the same sword. Fortunately, her days as the quintessential ice princess seemed to be at an end – unless he was very much mistaken, Daphne was undeniably developing more than a small crush on Theodore Nott. If Harry put a lot of effort into it, and got lucky, he could fluster Daphne. Nott could do it with extraordinary ease. That would be interesting to watch.

Hermione blocked what looked to be a Stunning Hex, twisted down and spun out to the side in a remarkably graceful movement and fired off...well, she didn't fire off anything, at first. Then the flare of a strong Lumos hit Greengrass in the eyes while she was expecting an attack, and that was all it took. A Restraining Spell wrapped ropes around her ankles, and she went down hard, dazed. Impressed, Harry nodded to Hermione as she rose. She smiled slightly, offering a hand to Daphne, who had rid herself of her ropes. The pureblooded heiress took the Muggleborn's offered hand with only a slight hesitation, hauling herself to her feet. Daphne went over to get a drink of water and sat down to watch the duels, while Hermione came his way. Harry applauded softly as she approached, trying to keep an eye on the dozen or so other duels that were going on, as well as the target

practice of some of the younger students. Ron and Neville were at it now, and Ginny was putting up quite an effort against Mary Lochley who was more than holding her own. After Hermione, she was probably the most impressive Muggleborn who regularly attended.

"Happy with your underlings' performance?" Hermione asked, her face a bit red from exertion, her breathing still slightly labored.

Daniel Callaghan, a 6th year Gryffindor, was waging a slow and deliberate battle of wits with Theodore Nott. To their left, Susan Bones was hammering down the defenses of Francis Lynch, who didn't look like he'd known what to expect from the truly ferocious Hufflepuff. Turning back to Hermione, Harry cracked a wan smile. "You know it isn't like that. But yes, I really like what I'm seeing."

His friend's smile back was a little less mirthful. "It's good, that all this is happening. I just...well..."

"I know," Harry said softly, as Ginny found a hole in Lochley's solid defenses, finally pushing her back as she winged the older Slytherin with a Stinging Hex. Another volley of spells at her off-balance target, and Mary was down.

"Have you heard back from your parents?" he asked abruptly, as it suddenly dawned on him that since the emotional confrontation in the Slytherin Common Room they had not discussed her parents' desire to withdraw their daughter. Predictably, and possibly justly, Hermione was not happy that it had taken so long, as she took in a sharp breath, and her eyes narrowed slightly. Harry was about to reply when he saw a few blinding flashes to his right, as Anthony Goldstein and Morag MacDougal, both the youngest sons of a pair of important Light families, combined to create a spectacular display of magical energy, though neither actually went down.

Hermione seemed to likewise have also been distracted, though by her thoughts or the duel, he didn't know. "Yes," she said shortly. "About a week ago. But it hasn't come up, and you didn't ask."

Harry sighed. "I'm sorry." And he was. Hermione's frustration was palpable in her voice, her breathing, the slight twitch of her eyebrows, the set of her jaw. Her body language was well known to him now.

"That's alright," Hermione said, as her cheeks began to return to their normal hue. "I know your life is mad. But we get to talk less often than I would like."

"I feel the same way," Harry assured her, which he was fairly certain was true. Hermione had a nasty habit of pointing out elements of his thinking and actions that he did not like or want to see, and finding the smallest holes in his logic. He knew he should be grateful for that – with the way his mind worked, he needed someone to keep him honest. That had been one of Ginny's priorities, but, well...

Lost in his thoughts, he turned back to the duels around him. Susan Bones had bested Mandy Brocklehurst with a rebounded Stunner; Elizabeth Goldstein, Anthony's 4th year sister, had downed Melissa Quinn. Blaise appeared to have just had his arse handed to him by the quiet and unassuming Lisa Turpin. That was his housemate's worst weakness – chronic overconfidence, which unfortunately led to a temporary but severe lack of confidence when things turned out badly. It was possible that his talents merely lay outside of dueling. Harry knew that he'd been working extensively with his father on the art of crafting magical illusions during the holidays, and shown slightly greater aptitude for it than he had demonstrated previously.

There was a brilliant flash of light as Ron Weasley overloaded Cho Chang's shield and sent her sprawling.

Hermione snapped her fingers in front of his face, looking annoyed. Harry jerked back to attention. "Sorry," he said. "Just keeping an eye on things. How much did I miss?"

"Oh, just about half a sentence before I realized you were entirely somewhere else," she replied, sounding exasperated and a little hurt. "What I was saying was that my parents relented and no longer insist that I come home immediately. There will still be a conversation at the end of the year, one I'm not looking forward to, but that was the best I could get. They also asked me to keep them informed so that they

don't learn everything through the Daily Prophet and the Wizarding Wireless Network. I had to agree."

Harry sucked in a breath. "You got your parents a subscription to the Prophet? I suppose I can understand why, but that was asking for trouble, Hermione."

Hermione looked upset at his remark, and he realized that he could have been considerably more diplomatic. "I'm sorry, that was uncalled for."

"You are right, to an extent," she conceded. "But I love my parents, Harry, and I was so excited when I got my letter to Hogwarts. I wanted them to understand so they could be proud of me and mirror my own enthusiasm."

"I'm sure they'll always be proud of you, Hermione."

She blushed slightly. "Thanks. But while all of that was fine when things weren't so close to home, they are learning things now it would probably be best they didn't...I think. I don't know. I hate keeping secrets like that from them. Certain things I can keep to myself without any trouble, but..."

She looked increasingly stressed and worn down, and Harry could tell that this had been eating at her for a while. "...when they ask if I am safe, if I am well, if my friends are well...I don't want to lie. I don't want them to assume I'm fine when I'm not. But they don't understand. They can't understand. But at the same time, they are probably right. In any normal circumstances, they would be right to shield me. But these aren't normal. Not remotely." Hermione, always a bit prone to emotional outbursts, looked like she was on the verge of tears.

"Hey," Harry said, reaching an arm around her shoulders. She accepted his gesture, leaning in so that their heads touched. "This is never going to be easy - for anyone. We have to do our best. Sometimes that means we have to do things we think are wrong, precisely because we feel they aren't. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Hermione nodded against his side. "I just wish that things weren't so difficult with us, Harry," she said softly. "I know that you care, and that means the world to me, but sometimes you just seem so distant and inaccessible, and then you're not the same kind, understanding friend you were a few years ago, and I just can't bring myself to entirely believe it. And if I can't believe that you are there for me, how can I..."

Given their location, this was getting more emotional than Harry was comfortable with. Fortunately it didn't seem like anyone was paying any particular attention. Those not actively dueling or practicing were observing other combatants, hoping to pick up new spells or techniques, as well as offering advice. It was a very positive cooperative dynamic, and Harry felt quite proud of that, and of them.

Returning to the matter at hand, he gave his friend an apologetic look. "I'm sorry I've let you down," Harry said, closing his eyes. "I'm sorry I haven't been the best of friends, especially in this time when you really need me. To be honest, Hermione, the pressure you are under doesn't always show. It comes out at times, but the rest..."

"Wonder who I learned that from," she said, nearly deadpan.

"That's what you get for befriending a Slytherin," Harry teased her. She swatted at him weakly, then stood up. "Are you alright? Honestly?" Harry asked.

Hermione shook her head slightly. "I really don't know the answer to that question, Harry. I would ask the same thing of you, but..."

Harry let out a low laugh. Hermione smiled in resigned, bitter amusement. Nothing needed to be said there.

"You've been watching more than you've been participating during the last couple of sessions," she said, changing the topic abruptly. "Is there a reason for that?"

"Would you be asking if you didn't think there was?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Just answer the question, you idiot."

"Yes," Harry replied. "I've been thinking about how dangerous things have become for me, and for everyone close to me. And I've started to believe, as depressing as it is, that those people should really be, for their own safety, those that seem the most capable in potential combat situations."

Hermione's eyes widened. "Harry, are you talking about some sort of inner circle or something? You do realize how, well, to be blunt, You-Know-Who that sounds like? Especially in this context. I mean, I'm sure that it isn't, but..."

Harry nodded. "Believe me, the comparison has dawned on me. But I still think it is necessary. And if something is going to happen, openly or not, there needs to be a distribution of members of each house. The sort of interhouse cooperation that I see out there is immensely encouraging. I can't risk compromising what we're building here."

"No, you really need to be careful," Hermione agreed. "So, do you have people in mind?"

"Don't even pretend to wonder if you are included. You're cleverer than I am and as well-trained as anyone here."

"And you need Gryffindors."

"Don't be like that. You wouldn't be alone."

"Neville?"

"Hmm?" Harry asked, as he watched Ginny finish off Justin Finch-Fletchley in what had likely been a quick and brutal contest. "Yes, him," he said, refocusing. "And Ron Weasley."

Now that caught Hermione off guard. "You're sure?"

"Hermione, he deserves a fair bit of the credit for saving your life in Hogsmeade. He's good. A bit of a prat at times, but even that's getting better. I'm not going to hold childish grudges anymore. Not with something this important."

"I see," Hermione said, sounding skeptical. "I suppose that your thought process doesn't include the idea that making that kind of gesture will send a message about your new found open-mindedness and conciliatory attitude?"

"Oh get off," Harry said. "Of course. But still."

"Hmm..." Hermione said, looking around at their fellow students. "Not that I approve of this—"

"Yet."

"...yet," Hermione added with some reluctance, "but who else have you been thinking about?"

"Ginny," Harry said without thinking.

Hermione gave him a meaningful look before saying, "Things do seem better between you. I suppose you were together in stopping Dawlish."

"That's part of it. We've talked, a bit. And, well, I don't know where it's going. Regardless of my own relationship with her, and our future or lack thereof, I want her for this."

"Okay. And..?"

"Luna. Neville. Blaise. Daphne. Susan. Lisa. Terry. Anne and Melissa, probably...maybe Justin, possibly Padma, though I don't know her that well...and Giselle, though I know you aren't going to like that. Possibly others."

"This is going to be Slytherin heavy, isn't it?"

"Inevitably, though they'd be a plurality, not a majority."

"I see," Hermione said. "It's just an idea for now, right?"

"For now," Harry conceded. Hermione look relieved at that, presumably because it gave her more time to talk him out of it.

Putting that aside, he said, "On the subject of things we haven't discussed much, how have your efforts at harnessing your own unique abilities been going?"

Hermione blinked, blushing slightly. "Oh, right. Well, I haven't really...I haven't seen Professor McGonagall in a while. And, well, I can't really risk using fire spells in here, not with the lack of control I have at the moment." She lowered her voice. "It's all rather frightening, Harry."

"I understand. Believe me. But it's important that you work on those things."

Hermione looked down. "The last time I did anything like that was months ago, when Fudge was trying to have you arrested."

"And as I told you at the time, that was not a wise decision. You were just a Muggleborn friend of mine in his eyes, and those of a number of others. That's changed now, even if he's no longer in charge."

"Harry, I would appreciate it if you looked at me while we were talking," she said impatiently. Harry turned his body so that his eyes could no longer be easily drawn to what was happening around them. Just before he looked away, he saw Francis Lynch, a Slytherin in Ginny's year, lose to a slender auburn girl in Ravenclaw robes with the same high cheekbones. The younger boy's sister, Alexandra, he thought. 6th year. Harry was only passing familiar with the older members of his House. The elder Lynch was good friends with Lochley, if he remembered correctly.

Harry realized that several seconds had elapsed while those thoughts went through his head. "Sorry. There's too much going on in here."

Hermione sniffed a bit. "I wasn't...I did not feel as though I was in complete control at that moment. I just felt it coming, and I told them to get back, and they didn't listen..."

Harry laid a hand on her shoulder. "You told all of this to me before, remember. And I asked you to keep working at it, so that you could understand how and why you nearly barbecued a pair of Aurors."

Hermione closed her eyes. "I know. But I've been frightened since then, Harry. I didn't mean to do that. I know I'm supposed to be a Gryffindor, and all brave and fearing nothing, least of all myself. But I don't like to hurt people, Harry. And yes, I know that it is necessary. And I can deal with that."

"I know you can. It's just not going to be easy."

"No, it won't. But what bothers me is that I didn't mean to hurt them. I didn't think it necessary. And it still happened." His friend looked increasingly distressed, and he laid a comforting hand on her shoulder.

"Making it all the more important that you learn to harness your gifts, Hermione. I can only tell you to do it; it's your responsibility to actually see it through."

Hermione nodded. "Alright. I'll talk to Professor McGonagall about further instruction."

Harry smiled encouragingly. "You can do this, Hermione. You can do a whole lot when you set your mind to it."

She smiled in return, and in that smile, Harry saw the echoes of their former relationship, one of unquestioned best friends that willingly had faced death together at the tender age of eleven.

That was ever so long ago...

Harry checked his watch. Time had run over. He raised his wand, creating a thunderous BANG that carried over the sounds of dueling teenagers. "Alright everyone, we're done here. Excellent work, from all of you. I'd say a few of you were getting downright dangerous, and believe you me, that's a very good thing. See you again next week, though of course you are welcome to use the Room at any time you wish. But let's call it finished for now, yeah?"

There were some grumbles, but Harry's words were mostly met by murmurs of assent. The crowd began to disperse, heading for the exit.

Ginny caught his eye for a moment, and smiled. It was one of the most beautiful things Harry had seen in ages, and he couldn't help but grin madly in return. He looked back at Hermione, who looked dreadfully uncertain, and at that moment quickly enveloped him in an embrace, which he returned as best he could. When they broke, the room empty except for them, he looked hard into the face of the girl who was the closest thing he had to a sister, hands resting on her shoulders. "I believe in you, Hermione. Always have, and always will."

"Thank you, Harry," she whispered.

Scrubbing the filthy dungeon floors in the corridor outside of Snape's office and the Potions Lab, Blaise Zabini was about as unhappy as he could ever recall being. He was trying to remove what must of been three centuries of...I don't even want to think about it. Shuddering slightly, he went back to making what seemed to be no difference at all in the cleanliness of the darkened floor. So dark, in fact, that he could barely tell what he'd gone over already. The only indication he was accomplishing anything was the dirt and grime that now soaked his cleaning rag.

Still, Blaise was fortunate that Snape's punishment was only to clean a half of the eight or so square meters of corridor in question. Of course, it meant that when he finished that job, he wasn't done with his detention. No, Snape had informed him, with a certain kind of amused malice, that one of the auxiliary potions labs had suffered a few accidents over the years, and the desks and floor surfaces needed cleaning. Blaise reasoned that he anticipated having a larger N.E.W.T. Potions class the following year, due to the abnormally large size of his year's Slytherin contingent. There were eleven in total, even after Tracey Davis, the only one of them with a known Muggleborn parentage (besides Harry), had to leave a month or so ago for what Snape had disinterestedly described as 'personal reasons.' Millicent Bulstrode, a nasty piece of work herself, had hinted that Tracy was suffering from depression, but the timing suggested that her parents no longer saw Hogwarts as a safe place from their daughter. Her departure had been compensated for with the addition of the still-mysterious Giselle Reisor the previous year.

Of course, that was still a pretty pathetic excuse; though it was unlikely he'd be in Snape's class the following year, their current classroom appeared more than adequate. No, Snape just wanted to torment him. What made it all the more unbearable was that this was the Saturday afternoon of a Hogsmeade weekend. Blaise gritted his teeth, cursing himself for forgetting to throw a Silencing Charm on the broom closet door where he and Elisha Moon had been...occupied with one another. Well, sort of. It had started out decently enough, but by the time Filch had found them, it was their arguing that had alerted the irritable Squib. He'd given them both detention, Blaise with Snape and Elisha with McGonagall. And then Moon had finished things between them, again. And, Blaise thought, as his rag caught on a particularly stubborn piece of something unmentionable encrusted upon the stone beneath him, that was probably a good thing. He'd really had enough of her. She was a brilliant Potions student, and his parents had not expressed disapproval. Although of wizard parentage, her family was nothing special. Still, her aggravating certainty that if she was compromising what she desired in the slightest, she was doing wrong, had finally finished things off between them.

Blaise decided that the floor was clean enough. Picking himself up and grimacing at the Merlin-knows-what all over his robes, he looked around. Seeing no one, Blaise cast a pair of Cleaning Charms on the lower half of his clothing. He walked over to knock on Snape's office door.

The door opened slightly, and the hook-nosed man glared. "What is it, Zabini?"

"I'm done with scrubbing the floor, sir," Blaise said, not meeting Snape's gaze. It tended to irritate the man.

"Are you now?" He glanced behind the Slytherin 5th year and surveyed the darkened floor - not that Blaise had any idea what such an action would actually accomplish. Unless Snape had been in the dungeons long enough to see in the dark, the floor here would appear as black and damp as anywhere in this part of the castle. Nonetheless, his Head of House seemed somewhat mollified. "I see. Report to the classroom three doors down on the left. You'll have help there. There are a number of cauldrons and other Potions

equipment that need thorough cleaning. I should not need to remind you, but magic is forbidden. Don't think I didn't notice the remarkably pristine state of your robes, Zabini."

"Yes, sir," Blaise said, with as much respect as he could offer.

"Well then? What are you waiting for? Get out of my sight!"

The door slammed. Blaise took in a deep breath, let it out slowly, and walked down the corridor to the classroom, bringing the rag and bucket with him. It wasn't worth the risk that Snape - or someone he gave a rat's arse about - might contrive to trip over them, earning him further punishment. It was bad enough that he was scrubbing floors on a Saturday. Elisha was probably having a much better time of it with McGonagall, who usually asked her students to perform clerical tasks.

Blaise came down to the door and found it slightly ajar. He pushed his way through, setting down the bucket and rag on the nearest desk, and looked up to see a pale and narrow face, beady gray eyes staring contemptuously back at him. Just my luck, Blaise grumbled mentally, recognizing instantly the white-blond hair of Harry's erstwhile rival.

The corners of Draco Malfoy's mouth hooked upwards into a wry smile. "So you managed to get yourself in trouble too, did you?"

"Evidently, or I doubt I'd be here," Blaise replied irritably. He moved over to where Malfoy had piled a small collection of cleaning supplies, including ancient-looking jars of some potion or other and a number of brushes and rags. "So, what have you done so far, and more important, what's left?"

Malfoy's smile was a bit vicious as he gestured to his right. Blaise now saw the magnitude of the task before them, grime-encrusted phials, cauldrons, and jars in a jumbled heap in front of one of the half-empty cabinets. "Dear Merlin," he breathed.

"To answer your question," Malfoy replied haughtily, "That's where I've put the things I've finished with," he said, gesturing to a much

smaller arrangement underneath the blackboard. "Figured I'd keep it all out of the way."

Blaise nodded, grabbed a brush and some cleaning potion, picked out what looked like a one of the less ruined pieces of glassware, and wordlessly set to work. "So what did you do," he asked, grunting as he encountered a more solid bit of filth, "to get Snape so angry with you?"

"I hexed a Gryffindor," Malfoy replied, saying the word with the utmost distaste. "The older Creevey runt. The Weasel twins had just...made it look like I'd wet myself, and that fool was snapping pictures. I destroyed his Muggle camera and broke his nose in one go. And McGonagall saw it." Draco sounded as if the thing he regretted the most was that he'd been caught.

Blaise supposed that there was nothing terribly wrong about that. Creevey was annoying. As a victim of the Weasley twins' pranks a few times his first few years, before (he suspected) Harry had stepped in, he understood his housemate's outrage. But that did remind him of something. "Hang on," Blaise said, "didn't the Weasley twin expel themselves, for lack of a better word, about two weeks ago?"

"I was ditching the detention. That's why I'm here, today of all days," Draco explained, sounding rather cross about it. "Honestly, I thought Snape would get me out of it. He just put me to work like a Muggle housemaid," the blonde sneered indignantly. "This is humiliating. For you as well," he added, as if the other boy ought to be outraged as well.

"I think that's rather the point," Blaise replied, scrubbing furiously as the brownish glob of solidified whatever slowly eroded under his brush's assault.

"I know that," Malfoy snapped, irritated. Blaise was beginning to regret making any effort to engage the arrogant prat in any form of conversation. He looked over at Blaise. There was still the hint of a sneer as he asked, "So what's your story, then?" but it also looked as if he genuinely wanted to know.

"Not nearly as good as yours," Blaise admitted in a low voice. "Got caught snogging in a broom closet. Well after the actual snogging had ended."

"With that Moon girl?"

Blaise, wondering why he was telling Malfoy any of this, lest it be turned back on him for a few hours' torture, nodded. "She broke it off afterwards, too."

Malfoy looked thoughtful. "You're well rid of her, Zabini. Trust me."

Blaise flashed an accusing look. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"She was leading you on," Malfoy explained. He held up his gloved hands as Blaise began to object. "I'm telling the truth here. Honest. I'm too bloody tired of this, of everything, really, to bother messing with you now."

"Alright." Blaise was unconvinced, and a bit confused.

"Anyway," Draco replied, examining the cauldron he'd been working on, holding it to the dim light from the torches to determine its level of cleanliness, "I heard a 6th year, Pucey, you know, one of the Chasers, talking about her in rather unflattering terms. Seems she had a bit of a fling with him, and wanted more."

Blaise sighed. Somehow none of this came as a surprise. The girl only wanted the moon, but she was scared of commitment and didn't know what she truly wanted out of any relationship. "Yeah, that sounds about right."

"It happens," Malfoy said, sounding as if he meant it. He looked up at Blaise's questioning gaze. "What? Do you think I haven't had my own personal fiascos? Parkinson basically decided I was useless after Potter whipped me last year. Her...rejection of me is a problem, mind, since her parents are dead set on a marriage alliance with the Malfoys."

"Pansy never struck me as the most loving sort."

Draco snorted. "Well, think about who you are talking to. But no. She's cold. Cold and cruel. Not much of a friend, either. Bulstrode is more useful when I actually want to talk about something. And Millicent's social skills are appalling for someone of her background. It is kind of shocking. You know of her family, of course?"

Blaise nodded. The Bulstrode's reputation certainly preceded them: a Dark family of considerable wealth and an unusual but strong matrilineal tradition that traced itself back to an obscure branch of the family Black. While Millicent was, as Draco had alluded, nothing to write home about, her formidable mother Lucretia was worthy of notice. "I can't imagine that her sister, let alone her mother, is an easy act to follow. Circe was a pretty imposing presence."

"Hardly bothered to heed the younger Slytherins. I never really knew her," Draco admitted. "But I can't disagree. And," he said, a bitter smile coming to his face, "I suppose I know all about failing to live up to your family's reputation."

Blaise stared at the disgraced blonde scion for a long moment, as it occurred to him just how much he related to those circumstances. As the rival of his closest friend in Slytherin, Blaise had never really thought of Draco Malfoy as anything more than an enemy, a threat to be watched with great caution. "Why are you telling me this, Draco?" he asked softly.

The Malfoy heir was quiet for a long moment. "Because you are listening," he said. "And because I'm no longer in any position to be that picky about who I consider worthy of my attention. Potter humiliated me in front of everyone. He shattered whatever credibility and respect I might have garnered before – from my father's reputation more than anything else," he admitted. He paused, and seemed to be mulling over the wisdom of continuing. Finally, he said, "You ought to know about being humiliated by that boy."

Blaise seethed. "What the hell are you talking about? I wasn't the one who had my wand snapped and my own threats thrown back in my face!"

"No," Draco said, softly, his voice lacking the malicious edge that Blaise would have expected, sounding almost regretful, "but we've all seen you following him around like a lost puppy, never giving up even after he rejects you again and again. Potter's a good friend if you are Weasley or Granger. Well, most of the time. But I daresay he's never really been that to you, has he?"

Blaise bit back a retort, considering the claim. Draco was making some sense. His relationship with Harry Potter had never felt secure. Potter had pushed him away when he concluded that their friendship had been an illusion created on the orders of Arabella and Stefano. There had been that, of course. But Blaise was always a little upset with Harry for assuming that he spent time with Harry during their third year solely because he'd been instructed to get close to the-Boy-Who-Lived by his parents.

Blaise had always been drawn to Harry, found his very presence strangely exhilarating. There had even been moments where his feelings had...well, gone in unexpected directions, though he knew that nothing could come of them. Potter had rewarded his efforts to renew their friendship by choosing Granger over him during one of their rows the previous year. He was always friendly to Blaise. But it was a rare occasion when Blaise could really call him a friend.

Then again, Potter had become distant to just about everyone since his guardian had fled the school. The absence of the more sociable Ginny Weasley from his life seemed to have just exacerbated the tensions between Harry and the others in his varied social circle. He'd been in the Common Room a couple of weeks ago when Granger had burst in, distressed and angry. Harry was pushing them all away, and he didn't even seem to be conscious of it.

Blaise then became conscious that Malfoy, no longer even bothering to pretend to work, was staring at him, pale grey eyes expectant. "It's complicated," he growled, cleaning a phial with a bit more force than necessary. It cracked under the pressure, and Blaise bit back a curse.

Draco cocked his head. "Complicated? Is that the best you can come up with?"

"What the hell is it to you?" Blaise demanded. The damaged phial fell to the ground, shattering. "Need to share your feelings of inadequacy and social isolation? Does that make you feel better, Malfoy?" Blaise backed away, sitting on the edge of a desk. The other Slytherin said nothing, just staring back at him. Anger gave way to confusion. This was not the Draco Malfoy Blaise remembered.

He saw a flicker of hesitation in the blonde's eyes. "It isn't like that," he said, almost in a whisper. "It's none of my business," he admitted. "I just see it. And you don't."

"Well thank you for enlightening me," Blaise said, with no small hint of sarcasm.

Draco scoffed. "What? Do you think I care if Potter gets away with treating you like his spineless lapdog? I may not hate you as much as him, Zabini, but that hardly means I think of you as a friend."

The feeling is mutual, Blaise thought, but left that unsaid. "I don't know why you bothered, but thank you. Not that I think you are right about everything."

"Well, you wouldn't, would you," Draco replied, his voice again surprisingly neutral. "And I hardly blame you for wondering if I'm just trying to manipulate you, to get at Potter, or somesuch nonsense."

"Or get to my family."

Draco looked a bit forlorn at that suggestion. "If only I were in such a standing with my father that I might be given that kind of task. Lucius," he almost hissed the name, "would probably disown me if he had a choice. I'm certain he's regretting not giving himself more options with mother. Gods, I wouldn't be surprised if he's thought about trying again, since I will clearly never amount to anything."

"Don't say that." It was out of Blaise's mouth before he could think better of it.

Now it was Draco's turn to be surprised. "How touching, Zabini. I had no idea you cared."

"I don't...well, I didn't," Blaise corrected himself. "Look, I'm in the same spot."

"Are you now?" Malfoy replied, drawing closer to him, a hint of that familiar sneer finally returning. "How exactly can you relate to being the last legitimate heir of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black?"

"You're joking," Blaise said. The Blacks were the pillar of the Dark pureblood families, the bloodline that every Dark family worth anything could trace its decent to. Even his own father, hardly a conventional British pureblood, claimed some level of kinship with that clan.

Draco laughed harshly, his eyes glinting with momentary madness. "I suppose that I'm not technically the last. If you looked hard enough, you might find a distant living relative of mine that hasn't been disowned, or who isn't a blood traitor, a Weasley, or a post-menopausal psychopath."

"What have the Weasleys to do with anything?" Blaise asked.

"I'm related to their mother by marriage," Draco admitted, looking ill at the very idea. "So, what crushing responsibilities have you got on your shoulders, then, that you think you have any idea how I feel?"

Before Blaise could answer, there was a loud bang as the door to the classroom flew open, and an irate Severus Snape caught both of them in a vicious glare. "Misters Zabini and Malfoy," he said, his voice deathly calm. "I believe that I assigned you to clean the contents of this room, a task I set to you some time ago. It has not been accomplished, nor do I see any evidence that you have been trying to accomplish it. I will return in one hour. If your work remains unfinished, I will see to it that each of you has sufficient opportunity to become acquainted with the rest of the Lower Dungeons. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, sir," they both replied.

Snape gave them one last sneer before he turned to go. With one last glance at his unlikely comrade, Blaise got back to work. He'd be damned if he spent another Hogsmeade Saturday in this miserable place.

Even if the company was a bit better than I expected...

Harry tried to calm his thoughts with the scritch-scratch of his quill dancing over the piece of parchment laid before him. It had certainly been an eventful day, one he was not soon to forget. For once though, he reflected, eventful had not also meant traumatic; far from it, really. What he had experienced earlier had even been a great deal more pleasant than, say, the process of writing this Transfiguration essay, or, before that, evicting students from broom closets in his capacity as one of Slytherin's 5th year prefects. Not that he didn't sympathize with the young men and women that had desired a bit of privacy, but rules were rules. Hermione would have been proud of him.

Harry mused on the events of that day, closing his eyes and letting the memories flow over him.

Entering the Three Broomsticks, Harry looked around, feeling for all the world like a lowly first year, desperately searching the Great Hall for his few friends. That was not the case, of course. He was a Fifth Year. And he was scanning the pub, looking for...her.

She sat alone at a table with her back nearly to him. She was recognizable nonetheless by the fiery mane which trailed down over her shoulders. She wore a cloak that Hermione had given her the previous Christmas, a steaming Butterbeer sitting before her. Feeling an unfamiliar trepidation, Harry made his way over, catching her eye as he sat down, pushing an uncertain smile onto his face. "Hello, Ginny."

"Harry," she said, sounding somewhat enthused, if reserved. "I'm glad you came."

"Well," he said, as he shucked his own cloak, "I wasn't exactly going to stand you up, was I? At least, I'd have to be quite an idiot, giving what you are offering me?"

Ginny cocked her head. "And what is that, exactly?"

Harry was caught off-guard. What exactly did Ginny think he was here for, if not to apologize, to explain, to see what of their friendship could be salvaged after everything that had happened? "Well, a chance to talk to you, first and foremost. Alone. Without the constraints of a chance meeting in a hallway or the Common Room."

Ginny nodded in understanding. Then, her carefully constructed mask began to buckle, and Harry could see that she was no less anxious about this than he was. It was comforting. Ginny had an uncanny knack for seeing right through him, piercing his emotional defenses and, when she had a mind to, turning him into a hesitant mess. Not that Harry did not also have the ability to unnerve the youngest Weasley if he set his mind to it. But if there was a time for a pair of hardened Slytherins to put aside manipulation and deception in favor of honesty, this was it. This was his chance, he knew. And hers.

"We hurt one another," Ginny said softly, voicing precisely what he was thinking. "Don't look at me like that – I know that I said a few things I had no right to say, and I said them out of fear and anger that you could not possibly have understood. I don't want to mess around here, Harry."

"Muffilato," Harry cast, grateful for that little piece of spellcraft that Sirius had supplied him with.

"You probably expected me to dither about, to delay talking about this," she said, her eyes blazing with a fierce determination he'd scarcely seen before. Then she grinned nervously. "Why do you think I asked to meet you here, as opposed to coming into Hogsmeade with you? I needed time to put myself together. You know me. I'm all

confidence one minute, then falling apart the next. I cycled through it a few times before you got here."

Harry now noticed the slight redness surrounding her brown eyes. "That was a good decision."

"It was, wasn't it?" she said, smiling sadly. "Harry...I'm sorry. I haven't had a chance to say that yet."

Harry stared at her in disbelief. "Sorry for what, exactly? For refusing to play along, for showing me how blind I was to Daphne's nature, to her actions? For angering me by saying what I should have understood months ago? How do you have anything to apologize for?"

Ginny shrugged. "Just accept it. Please."

"I do. Of course I do," Harry said, his own emotional barriers straining against the waves of anxiety and regret that had lain buried for so much of the last few months. "And I...Ginny, you know that..." He struggled to get the words out. Ginny smiled.

"I know, you big idiot. I've known since the day it happened." Her voice was so soft as to be approaching a whisper. There were tears glistening in her eyes, but she was holding together. "And I forgive you."

Harry started. "Ginny, don't..."

"My forgiveness is mine to give as I please," she reminded him sharply. She took a deep breath, closing her eyes for a long moment. "Look, I'm not going to pretend that what you did wasn't horrendous, that I wasn't flooded by fear and anger for weeks at the sight of you. You hurt me. But I also hurt you."

Harry marveled at her, trying to find his own composure, adjusting to an attitude he had not dreamed of when he reviewed the potential scenarios for this meeting. As was so often the case, his life and that of the people around him was refusing to cooperate with his advanced planning. "Alright then. I suppose..."

"Say it," she said fiercely. "I won't have you consumed with guilt. Not alone, anyway."

"I suppose that your words were extreme," he forced out.

"Harry, I as good as called her evil. I said she was no better than the rest. And I was wrong. She's not evil, Harry. She's broken."

"I know," Harry said. It had taken a long time to accept that the illusion of his guardian recovering from her traumatic experiences in the first war with his help had been just that. It had always been just that. Daphne had never sought help, too proud, too determined, too dedicated to all those responsibilities she had left. And in the end, he knew, that anger, that rage, that desperation, that madness had consumed her. This was not something he had discussed with anyone; not Hermione, not Remus.

But when he had asked Rufus Scrimgeour, a shrewd politician but at his heart a stalwart of the Light, to bring down Fudge's government, he had known that the former head of the Auror Office would only be more motivated to bring Daphne to justice than his predecessor. You never really left the Aurors, not in this life, anyway. The wizarding world's policemen cum soldiers, they stood for law, order, and public safety. If they could not perform those duties, and, more importantly, have the confidence of the public that this was so, the Ministry would be just another actor in a chaotic maelstrom that vied to rip their society apart. Aiden had once said of the Aurors, "No Dark Patriarch would ever submit to an Auror's authority. But neither would he ever consider ignoring their orders."

In Scrimgeour's mind, Daphne was an anathema to the mission of the Aurors - a vigilante, acting out of personal motives, killing with extreme prejudice by illegal means, and doing so wearing the war-torn visage of one of the First War's legendary heroes.

And Harry had understood this, and agreed in word. It was only after much reflection that he had come to agree in heart.

Ginny looked at him with concern. "I'm sorry, Harry. I'm sorry that I forced that truth on you with all the subtlety of a troll."

"How long have you known?" Harry found himself asking.

"Since my second year," she said softly. "In the Forest. She tortured and killed Amycus Carrow right in front of me. And then she left me there, staring at a man's gutted shell." The emotion was gone from her voice. She swallowed. "She didn't let him go easily..."

"She did that in front of you?" Harry asked, aghast.

"Now you understand why I never doubted that Daphne had killed Avery. I had seen that side of her before."

"But you didn't say anything!"

Ginny gave him a forlorn look. "What would you have had me do? Tell you, and jeopardize one of my most important relationships? And after we started dating...I couldn't do it, Harry. I was too frightened of the consequences."

"Rightly, it turned out," Harry said darkly. His mind seemed intent on re-playing Ginny's helpless form crashing into the Common Room stones until he finally broke. He took in a shuddering breath. He could see Ginny trying to hold it together, to get out what needed to be said, to not allow one or the other to succumb to wordless emotion.

"I suppose," she said, sounding remarkably unconvinced.

"I was blind, Ginny. To some extent, I still think I am. I love her. I can't help that."

Ginny smiled sadly. "You say that as if it's a bad thing. As if it is unnatural and wrong for a ward to love his guardian, a son his mother. That Daphne is not an ordinary ward or guardian scarcely changes that."

Harry hesitated, then reached a hand out over the table. Ginny looked down at it for a moment, as if concerned it might rear up and

bite her. Then she laid both her hands upon it, looking into his eyes. "I forgive you. Now it's time to forgive yourself."

Harry closed his eyes for a moment, becoming lost in the chatter of the pub's various patrons, the groaning of furniture moved about, the raucous laughter of the particularly inebriated older students, taking fullest advantage of the wizarding world's legal drinking age of seventeen. He opened his eyes. Ginny was still there, her pleading expression still fixed upon her youthful face. "Alright. Ginny, this isn't just..over, though. It can't be."

She smiled wistfully. "I suppose that would have been too much to ask for, wouldn't it? But you are right, as always."

"I'm not always right," Harry protested.

The redhead sitting across from him blinked in surprise at the vehemence of his declaration. "Alright then. You aren't always right. But you were right when you said we had to be careful and take things slowly when we first started. And so we shall continue to be." She laughed. "Gods that sounded so formal..."

Harry smiled at that. Then he let his expression fall, as he said what was eating away at him with every brilliant grin that the littlest Weasley sent his way. "Ginny, you have to understand...we can't just go back to the way things were."

"I do understand," she told him firmly. "And I will wait, because I want you in my life, be it as a friend or...something more." She looked at him curiously. "This is about Daphne, isn't it?" she asked sadly.

Harry was flabbergasted, though he supposed he really ought to have gotten used to Ginny reading his mind, even the thoughts that weren't at that moment percolating on the surface. "In a way," he admitted, letting out a deep breath.

"You have to confront her. You have to prove to yourself that you can open your eyes, and more than that, you have to prove to yourself that you are willing to stand before her and question her actions."

Ginny's voice was level and calm. Harry marveled at her. "Look, it's not as though I haven't thought about this a lot. I'm just glad that I wasn't completely off the mark." She smiled nervously. "Come on. Let's go for a walk. Just to talk things over, catch up a bit."

"Sounds brilliant."

And so they had left the Three Broomsticks and begun to wander the streets of Hogsmeade. The damage done by the Death Eater raid had been mostly repaired. As they walked, they passed at least a dozen red-robed Aurors. While, it had taken a great deal of pressure from Hogsmeade's shopkeepers and merchants, the Ministry had been convinced to provide adequate protection for the students and residents, including safeguards such as emergency portkeys and evacuation points. Harry understood that there had been some resistance from Dumbledore and the other staff, but the precautions taken, as well as the argument that Voldemort should not be allowed to disrupt Hogsmeade, one of the largest magical settlements on the island, seemed to have eventually won them over.

Harry and looked down at his essay, a short introductory look at a relatively advanced topic – the theory behind Animagism. An odd thought struck him. While McGonagall was not in any way a poor educator, she tended to stick to a rigid syllabus that had remained unchanged for many years. Fifth Year Transfiguration was primarily devoted to practical applications as would be needed for the end of term O.W.L.s, but Gryffindor's Head of House had also insisted on including several modules on more complex and advanced subjects, to help the Fifth Years decide if they wished to continue on to N.E.W.T. level classes in the subject.

At that moment Harry wondered whether McGonagall had once stood before a class including Sirius Black, James Potter, Remus Lupin, and Peter Pettigrew, and unwittingly sowed the seeds in their imaginations that would blossom into the unheralded realization of an illicit dream. Harry tried to summarize some of the basics.

Animagus transformation obviously involves the same risks that any witch or wizard takes when performing any complex magic upon their

own bodies. It is an example of truly 'wandless' magic – studies by the unfortunately named Elric the Unhinged, more recently corroborated by Alfred Mutati, show that the presence or absence of a wand has no discernable effect on the rate of success for the inexperienced animagus.

Probably not his best writing, Harry reflected, but it was late and he wasn't going to be that picky. He'd skimmed the textbook enough to find a reference to the studies, and with help from Hermione had tracked down a copy of the report, as well as a brief explanation of Elric's activities. He hoped the extra work might make up for a lack of polishing.

Through it all, schoolwork remained important to Harry, although he found himself increasingly willing to put it second to what he saw as more important duties. Still, a lifetime of academic achievement encouraged by friends and elders meant that he could not bring himself to completely neglect his studies. Well, except History of Magic, which remained as boring and intellectually barren as ever. He'd know what he had to for the O.; unlike Hermione, he did not really hold himself to any higher expectations. More importantly (for him at least), Binns taught an extremely conservative and in many aspects severely dated version of magical history. Harry had long since ceased to hope that he might learn anything he didn't already know about Goblin-Wizard relations or the development of wizarding society as it existed today.

Glancing back at his textbook, then at the short outline he'd constructed the previous evening, Harry tapped his quill against his forehead, trying to focus his mind. It was odd, he supposed, that with his family history he would have little interest in becoming an animagus himself. But to Harry, his disinterest in that the kind of magical exercise fell under the same category as his infrequent use of his father's Invisibility Cloak and lack of enthusiasm for exploring the bursts of Metamorphmagic talent he had occasionally manifested. Harry Potter had little desire to cultivate skills that made him inconspicuous or unnoticeable. Far from it, it was his foremost objective to be as visible and active as he possibly could. He would leave the infiltration to others. Hermione had occasionally mentioned her interest in exploring Animagism - Harry had little doubt that if she

found the time to devote to it she could eventually manage it, making her almost unique among Muggleborns.

Harry's mind drifted back to the remainder of his time with Ginny, a time that had been, despite moments of tension and difficulty, thoroughly enjoyable. Ginny brought out a life and enthusiasm in him that could all too easily be consumed by his anxiety and single-minded determination. They'd continued to talk as they walked the streets, ending up near the Shrieking Shack. Mostly, they had endeavored to catch one another up on all of the small things that had gone undiscussed for months.

He found out more about her family, including that Bill had been called back by the Ministry and assigned to a small and somewhat covert group dedicated to studying and devising strategies relating to defensive wards. Charlie reported rumors circulating that the Ministry might even float the possibility of using magical creatures such as those under his care in the war effort. Fred and George were in the process of running a mail-order business out of the Burrow (something that did not please Mrs. Weasley in the least), with ambitions of earning enough to open a shop on Diagon Alley or in Hogsmeade.

Harry wondered if he might be able to help the two along – he still had half of the Triwizard Tournament winnings, which were, despite the uncertain status of Daphne's estate, rather unneeded, thanks to his parents' trust vault. The other half had been given anonymously to Amos Diggory over the summer, with a note reading only "Your son died a hero." Harry knew from Mr. Weasley that Amos had been suffering from severe depression since the events of last year, and he had resigned from his position in the Ministry. His wife was rumored to be in ill-health. Cedric had been the pride and joy of that family, and his death had ripped them apart. Harry recognized that there would be more to come, regardless of how effective he was as a leader.

Ginny and he had discussed other things as well, including some topics that he had not expected.

Ginny walked alongside him, looking down at the road with a troubled expression. Harry stopped slowly, concerned. Abruptly she met his eyes. "Harry, how have you been dealing with Kalas?"

He had somehow forgotten that she alone knew of the puzzling and frightening entity that seemed to have manifested itself out of Harry's darker emotions. "I haven't seen much of him," he admitted. "No additional dreams. I suppose that what anger I felt over Daphne was quashed soon enough," he said, guiltily. Ginny laid a hand on his arm.

"Don't be like that," she said gently. She paused. "Are you still as concerned as you were?"

Harry grimaced. "I've done some reading." And the reality was that the more research he did on magical mental disorders, the nature of magical power, and the links to the soul, the more confused he became. It was possible that Kalas was nothing more than a figment of his imagination, a dream-world reflection of his fears that his path to power might lead him down the same road of Tom Riddle, that his magic might overcome his ability to control it, that he would hurt the people he cared about. He communicated this to Ginny, who looked thoughtful.

"But you don't think it's that simple?"

Harry shook his head. "There's little published information on the subject. It could be a variant of a magic-specific form of multiple personality disorder which can interact with a wizard's own magic to create conflict within the core and the soul. But it's all speculative. Plenty of wizards have gone mad over the centuries, and the overuse or misuse of magic has been a frequent cause. But such inner conflict can hardly be examined and recorded by an outside observer."

Ginny nodded, squeezing his arm. "I think that you may need to let some one else know about this, if it appears to be more than just vivid nightmares...I don't suppose, well, this could be related to the Chamber?"

Harry frowned. "I've thought about that, of course. Dumbledore believed that what taint of Riddle remained on the magic that I took

from the Diary would eventually be subsumed by my own core, and purged, for lack of a better world, of the traces of its original owner. But that was little more than informed guesswork. The Diary was a rather extraordinary piece of spellcraft, an early effort at immortality, if Dumbledore is to be believed. Anyway, I have started to wonder if that magic fully integrated."

"So Kalas might be your inner Tom Riddle," Ginny followed, frowning.

"Something like that. There's also the possibility that far from fearing him, I need to accept that he is a part of me to reach my full potential."

Ginny looked uncomfortable. "Let's not be too hasty there. You are, well...unique, Harry. You don't follow the rules. You need to be careful. Kalas seemed like a nasty bugger."

Harry nodded, shivering at the ghosts of memory. It felt good to finally speak about this with someone else. Hermione undoubtedly would have panicked. And Daphne was not here for him now. Ginny listened, analyzed, and probably privately worried, but understood Harry's purpose in keeping these developments a secret. He knew that she also recalled his period of mental instability after his ordeal in the Chamber, before Luna had put his mind right. But she was Slytherin, and had only become more so since her unexpected Sorting. She understood discretion.

He sought to change the subject. "So I hear you have been looking after Peter..."

Hermione sat in her favorite corner of the Library, a quill in one hand, a book on Antidotes in her lap, a piece of parchment over that (with an appropriate charm to prevent any ink dirtying the pages while she took notes). It was at that moment she became aware of someone breathing. Right in front of her. She looked up in some alarm, hand reaching instinctively for her wand. Then she stopped, as protuberant blue eyes met hers, their perpetually puzzled appearance instantly identifying her unexpected visitor.

"Hello Hermione."

"Hello Luna."

She stared at the younger Ravenclaw for a long moment, but Luna seemed to have conquered the human need to blink. Just as Hermione thought that, her hypothesis was proven invalid. Luna opened her eyes again, tilting her head to the left, then the right.

"Can I help you?" Hermione asked as politely as she could manage. The enigmatic Ravenclaw had a strange connection with Harry, but she and Hermione had never been that close. Luna irked the logically minded girl with her ridiculous and nonsensical statements about creatures that certainly did not exist, conspiracies theories that would put delusional Freemasons to shame, and a general disregard for anything Hermione said to disagree with her.

"Perhaps," Luna answered at last. "I realize that the Hermione is rather busy at this time. But the Hermione is busy nearly all of the time. Have you..." she paused, looking down, before again meeting her eyes. "You see, I could have said something about Nargles or Heliopaths. But I did not."

"Ummm...thank you?" Hermione suggested. While she was certainly grateful to avoid another argument, especially when she had this blasted Potions essay that she had somehow completely forgotten about, she suspected Luna wanted something. "It will probably make things easier if you continue that way."

"What things?" she asked, looking genuinely baffled. Hermione was not nearly as good at reading body language as her Slytherin friends (for whom it was to some extent a vital social survival skill). "Oh, I suppose I know what you mean. But it might serve you well to be more specific, lest great confusion arise."

"Thank you. I'll remember that," she replied, with only a hint of insincerity.

"You find me an annoyance, a pest."

"No!" Hermione said, louder than she had intended. As difficult as Luna could be at times, she was a sweet and kind girl, and had been punished for her eccentricities by bullying from her Ravenclaw housemates. And Hermione, the memory of her and Harry's ostracization from their first year still etched in her memory, was appalled to be perceived as a party to similar abuse. "No, Luna, it isn't like that."

Luna looked surprised by the vehemence of her reaction. Then again, Luna always looked slightly surprised. "I did not mean to imply that you were one of those others, those that hide my things and call me Loony. It amuses me, you know. They think that by belittling me they can convince me to be more like them. They hide my things when it is actually little trouble for me to find them again. They call me childish names. And they believe that when I act childlike in return, I am being entirely genuine. It is rather puzzling, although I suppose that my Housemates have always related better to books than people."

Hermione blinked. She did have some friends in Rowena's House, notably fellow Muggleborn Lisa Turpin, and to a lesser extent Mandy Brocklehurst, Terry Boot, and Padma Patil. While she thought that they probably knew about the treatment of Luna, she hoped they had not been actively involved. Lisa had expressed confusion the few times Hermione had asked – her Ravenclaw friend knew of the incidents second-hand, and personally thought Luna exceptionally odd, but had never witnessed any bullying.

"I suppose that was an over-generalization. I ought to know better, I suppose. It is not a stretch to say that I know some of my Housemates better than they know themselves. Which is a rather curious concept, when you come to think about it..."

"Luna," Hermione said firmly. "Was there something you wanted to talk to me about?"

Luna looked down and frowned, her long hair falling over her face in a veil of silver. She made no attempt to remove it. "Are we not talking now? Am I not doing this correctly? We could start over if you would like. Just return to your reading, and-"

"That really won't be necessary," Hermione cut in. "I was wondering if you wanted something from me, or wanted to convey specific informa-

Luna continued to speak through her passing resemblance to a long-haired sheepdog. "It intrigues me that you assume I want something. Though I suppose that has always been a great anxiety of yours, hasn't it, Hermione Granger? With your intellect, and your willingness to display it publicly, many have looked to you as a convenient source of academic aid, even to an inappropriate extent. And for a while, you gave them what they wanted, didn't you?"

Hermione blinked as memories of her Muggle primary school days came rushing back. "Yes. Yes I did. And it was a poor decision. I haven't...I've been worried about it since I came to Hogwarts. I expected that wizards and witches my age would be as excited as I was to explore all of the amazing things we are taught here."

"But children are children, no matter what their gifts," Luna replied, a knowing smile on her face.

"I suppose that is true. I was a child."

"Yes, you were," Luna said firmly. Hermione frowned.

"There's no reason to sound so smug about it. We all make mistakes."

"Of course. I had no wish to imply anything to the contrary. Perhaps you make a mistake even now, in your haste to disregard what you see as my ramblings on things that do not exist. It could certainly be argued that the magical world is complex and mysterious, and there is every possibility the Crumple-Horned Snorkack and the common Nargle exist, although so-called experts do not recognize this. Perhaps they are embarrassed to admit that much of the world remains unknown to them. There is nothing that scares anyone more than admitting that they do not have the answer. I know that helplessness. I have endeavored to accept that it will always be true."

Hermione couldn't help but agree. "Alright, I suppose that you could be right. But I have read the Quibbler. And the editors present the things you say as fact, and not just fact, but fact that has been deliberately concealed from us."

"He may be wrong, of course," Luna said. "I am not my father. Which is a good thing, because it would be rather difficult for a man to not only father himself, but also to do so in the form of a small girl with 'protuberant' blue eyes, as you put it. That is a rather apt description, isn't it? I rather like it. Protuberant," she said, dragging out the vowels and syllables. She giggled.

Hermione opened her mouth to say something, but Luna raised her hand. "You are no longer a child, Hermione Granger. And you have learned."

"Well, yes," she said, somewhat defensively. "Of course I've learned, and of course I'm no longer a child."

Luna cocked her head. "Is Harry?"

"Is Harry what?"

"A child?"

"I don't understand, Luna."

"Really? I thought it was a rather simple question. While I suppose that your parents got around to conceiving you a little less than a year earlier, you two are for all intents and purposes the same age."

Hermione blinked. She found herself doing that quite often. "Well, yes, I suppose that we are."

Luna nodded. "But you want to hold him back. And you worry that he knows that as well as you do. And so you fear that that you might lose him on that account. All of this is rather foolish, when you think about it."

"Think about what, exactly?" Hermione asked, her voice tetchier.

"Well, that for a person on the verge of cutting out of his life, he does tell you an awful lot."

"We've been friends since first year."

"So you have."

"And you think it wise to take that for granted?" Hermione asked, growing steadily more irritated. Luna was hinting at something, but in that maddening way of hers, pairing apparent omniscience with naivety and genuine confusion, forcing Hermione to work it out on her own.

"I don't think you do take it for granted, Hermione Granger. I think that your worry is ample evidence of that."

"Luna, you know something, and you aren't saying it. Did Harry put you up to this?"

The blonde shook her head. "No. If he was prepared to let you know something, he would tell you in person. Well, when his brain isn't full of Wrackspurts. It's a common condition in boys his age. They feed on hormones during the early stage of their growth cycle."

Hermione had no polite response to that, and said nothing. Luna blinked. "Oh, I suppose I should not have talked about creatures you do not believe in. It makes gaining your cooperation ever so difficult." Luna stared into her eyes, her sapphire gaze almost hypnotic. "He will always need you, you know. But you have to be ready. And you are not ready. Books are wonderful things, seemingly infinite depositories of knowledge, gathered together, written down, and passed on from the dawn of known history. Words are very powerful."

"I'd agree with that," the Gryffindor bookworm admitted, smiling slightly.

"And you believe that knowledge is an end in itself, rather than a means, don't you? It's a rather uncommon philosophy, actually, which is sad. Father says that great quantities of useless knowledge are the

ideal countermeasure against Heliopath possession. They become confused. I do not know if he is right. But he is my father, and that is worth something."

"He's all you have left," Hermione said, recalling what she knew of Luna's history. Harry had said her mother died in a spell accident when she was nine, and she was an only child.

"Yes." She frowned slightly. "Right, I remember why that seems familiar..."

"You mean...Harry and Daphne?"

"I suppose so, yes." She smiled toothily. "I do confuse myself once in a while. Father thinks it is Wrackspurts, but I believe I am immune to them." She paused. "Daphne is dying, I believe. It is difficult to tell. I can see Magic, you know. It is a talent that ran intermittently through my mother's side of the family. It was why she was so excellent at making new spells. Unfortunately, she was also a bit reckless. It did not end well," she said, with only a hint of sadness. "She was a special witch. I hope to make her proud."

"I understand," Hermione said, and she did. "What's wrong with Daphne?"

"Magic is a strange thing, Hermione Granger," Luna replied. "We try to classify it as Light and Dark, but that is rather silly, in the end. Others say that it is about intent. Others postulate on the existence of a soul, a moral fiber wound within the magical core that acts as a conscience and directs attitudes and behavior. But in the end, our magic and our soul, if you will, are much the same thing. Daphne has been hurting for a long time. Her magic is broken, because her soul is broken. She is wasting away. Her lines are faded, mottled. I look at you, and I see magic flowing about you, an aura of intelligence that I only occasionally find in my own House."

"I wonder sometimes if I should have been a Ravenclaw," Hermione admitted. "Bravery has never been my strongest attribute."

Luna said nothing to that. Then, "It takes courage to stand up to your enemies, but greater courage to stand up to your friends."

"Dumbledore said that. But you weren't here. That was my First Year, at the Leaving Feast. You pulled that from my mind, didn't you? I really would rather you didn't do that. It's a rather large invasion of privacy." Hermione was peripherally aware of Luna's special talents.

Luna nodded, looking a bit crestfallen. "Yes, I know. I just want to understand you. And everyone else. Because humans are so strange and so complicated."

"That's a laudable goal...but Luna, you should respect the privacy of others."

"Yes, I am learning this. I am still a child, Hermione. A child with much to learn. And you are my friend. I like having friends. I'm afraid I must be going. There is a Nargle infestation around Nearly-Headless Nick that is growing to alarming proportions."

And with that, she was gone.

A/N: Well, I'll admit I ended up with more character development than I anticipated, hence the chapter name, which implies that these little emotional developments may yet have some significant importance. I'm afraid I'm in that 'spring drag' phase of this book, where the action tends to fall off as storylines come together and set things up for future development.

I had originally planned some elaborate politicking, but I am thinking that may get moved to the summer before Harry's 6th year, so I can make my way to the endgame. It makes a bit more sense in-universe as well.

Probably two or three more chapters to go, and then an epilogue. Then, if I can manage it, I'll get six underway, and start being really original.

I'm still working on a few side projects - most important being the re-write of *Philosopher's Stone* because I really think it is representative

of an earlier, less developed, and less coherent stage of my writing, and it gives me a chance to tighten up the mythology and backstory that was sort of hit-or-miss for 1-3. It wasn't until 4 that I completely figured out what I was doing. Might be some one-shots from other fandoms as well if I end up churning them out.

Chapter 19: Dreaming

Rufus looked across his desk at the tall, familiar figure standing before him. Jericho Drake had always been a tough nut to crack, a Gryffindor through and through, but a rare one who had the ability to successfully channel his idealism into politics. Of course, even the best make mistakes, and Jericho now stood before the new Minister for Magic as the man that had betrayed the first attempt to bring down Scrimgeour's predecessor. Still, Drake came from a noble and storied background, a lineage that included two Ministers of Magic, one Headmaster of Hogwarts, and, of course, the great privateer and loyal servant of the Muggle queen Elizabeth I. Sir Francis Drake was said to have had tremendous skill in the realm of compulsion and other mental magic, a rare gift that had kept his crew faithful to him during the first global circumnavigation by an Englishman.

Jericho had never been any Francis, and the comparison had only grown more unflattering through the years. Tall and imposing, yes, but the great presence he once possessed had gone the way of his thinning hair and decaying eyesight. Drake was still a man to be reckoned with, certainly, and a man whom Rufus Scrimgeour very much wished to have on his side. By his action in the Bones Coup, as it had become known, he was now the rallying point of Fudge's old allies. Though they were not many, they were still of concern. The families of Jellicoe and Ashmore also stood in his way. The patriarch of the former, Richard, had even gone so far as to call for the Wizengamot to sanction Scrimgeour for his illegal seizure of power. The vote had no chance of passing, of course, but its very existence was a visible and troubling symbol of dissent in the highest ranks. This was why Rufus had Jericho Francis Drake in his office, the Minister's trusted aide Percy Weasley standing behind him, and Kingsley Shacklebolt guarding the door. As fond as he was of Nymphadora, his other bodyguard, this sort of situation called for Kingsley's calm and reassuring demeanor.

Amelia Bones' betrayer sat in the high-backed leather armchair that had been prepared for him opposite the Minister. Percy hurried out to take his coat and pour him a cup of tea, before returning to his place behind the Minister, quill in hand. If there was ever to be a statue dedicated to bureaucratic zeal, Percival Ignatius Weasley

would be its model. He was a fine young man that had taken a rather different path than the rest of his iconoclastic family. He was not really Minister-material, though Rufus would guess he held those lofty aspirations. Percy was too mechanical, too tied up in process and procedure, lacking the inspiration and creativity needed to lead effectively. Even so, he certainly had a future as a vital Ministry functionary, and a place of real power if he stuck with it long enough.

"Alright, Rufus. I assume you called me here with good reason," Drake began, affecting an extremely put-upon manner.

Rufus refused to rise to the challenge, instead opting for an extraordinarily blunt approach. "Generally, Jericho, I do not use my valuable time unwisely. Yes, I have asked for this meeting for a purpose - a very specific one. I want you to publicly renounce Fudge and throw your support behind my new government."

Scrimgeour expected another acting job from the man opposite him, and perhaps in Drake's youth he would have gotten it. This tired man, past his prime, his family's reputation and name now lain upon the shoulders of his mercurial son Albert, his boy now in his forties and still unmarried, a respected but thoroughly uninteresting wizard who served as a coordinator on the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad. Jericho's son was a skilled Charms wizard, but had little ambition of his own. His ageing father was watching the chances of his family's great name living on slowly diminish with each year. Jericho was a man who had increasingly little to lose, and that made him difficult.

"You know that I can't do that, Rufus," Drake said simply. "Indeed, I'm somewhat surprised you would even ask such a thing of me. I owe Cornelius a great deal, and I will not turn on him without reason."

Rufus raised an eyebrow. "Jericho, would you have me believe that you infiltrated the Bones Conspiracy, intending - from the beginning - to report their activities to the Minister?"

"Nothing so clandestine," Jericho admitted. "I am not a fool, Rufus. I recognized that Fudge was bleeding political support, and that he would either be replaced or forced to resign within the year."

The "Red Lion" frowned. "And yet you turned on Amelia once you heard they intended to do just that? Come now, Jericho..."

"Rufus, it does not matter to me if you believe my explanations. I am finished. I have no influence left to offer, no supporters I can count on. I remain proud of my service to the Light, and I would criticize your collusion with the Dark if I knew you had any interest in what I was saying."

Rufus considered this, trying to form a course of action, or at least a line of questioning that might bring him closer to an accord with Drake. The man sitting across from him was offering excuses, and poor ones at that. He presented himself as bound by his loyalty to Fudge, yet admitted that he had considered joining a conspiracy to depose him until they had sh. Jericho probably had his reasons, but what they were, and what he could do about them, Rufus was not sure.

Percy seemed to read his mind. "Forgive me for interrupting, sirs, but might I ask, Mr. Drake, if there are any concessions that might cause you to change your mind? The Minister has asked a great deal of you, and it is only fair that you make a reasonable counter-offer."

Rufus looked back at his aide, who appeared to be bracing himself for a rebuke. He gave him a nod of approval, at which the Weasley boy visibly relaxed. The Minister turned back to Drake. "Young Percy is quite astute. What can I do for you, Drake? What standards have I failed to meet, beyond not being a democratically elected official?"

Drake looked pensive, and Rufus was relieved to see that he was taking the matter seriously. "My objections, Rufus, spring from the fact that you took action without any prior authorization from the Wizengamot, the Advisory Council, or even Albus Dumbledore."

Scrimgeour had to start at that. "Dumbledore? I wasn't aware you cared a mote for his opinion. A fine man, a powerful wizard, and an experienced opponent of the Dark Arts, but hardly anyone with official clout."

Drake looked exasperated. "Rufus, at the pace of the reforms this century, the Advisory Council will soon lack anything like 'official' clout."

Scrimgeour considered that. He had long believed that, with the increased awareness of Muggleborn wizards and their greater participation in Wizarding society, the old, antiquated methods of 'advisory' governance would need to be replaced. It would be a hell of a row, whenever the time came. The Advisory Council, more frequently called the Pureblood Advisory Council, had been for centuries the 'power behind the throne,' even after the institution of the position of Minister for Magic had been established with landmark legislation in 1870. The Wizengamot had gained in 'recognized' power, but that body itself was strictly a court of law, rather than a Parliament, such as the Muggles had. He understood that the P.A.C. was the rough equivalent of the Muggle House of Lords, also mirroring its decay in relevance. Then there was the Ministry itself, a collection of bureaucrats that maintained law and order, the Statute of Secrecy, and, as Rufus liked to think of it, Common Decency. None of them were elected, but were selected by the Minister and his subordinates, unless a majority of the Wizengamot filed a formal objection, but they only had opportunity to do so in the case of the Department heads.

Perhaps it would all change, and perhaps even within his lifetime. After all, war had a way of breaking the hold of complacency on a state's citizens. But he knew that many would fight any kind of change, some for better reason than others.

Since his earliest days, Rufus had been a stalwart advocate of the Light, and, necessarily he believed, a staunch opponent of the Dark. His own family had suffered embarrassment when several prominent members were arrested for Dark Magic and crimes against Muggles. It had been then that his grandfather, Leonis Scrimgeour, had pushed his family away from the position of compromise, embracing a staunchly conservative and reactionary stance towards anything considered 'Dark.' And there they had remained, until, it seemed, now.

He had gotten lost in his thoughts, he realized, as Drake was staring at him impatiently, and Percy was making uncomfortable noises

behind him. "My apologies, Jericho. There is a lot on my mind. Your statement had me considering the current makeup of our governing system, and what might be done to change it, whether in our time or that of our children...figuratively speaking, of course." Rufus had no children. He had been married twice, but his first wife had been unfaithful and left him, and his second, the one he had loved, had been killed in the First War. Breca Scrimgeour neé Kane had been brutally murdered by her own sister, the notorious werewolf known best as Fiacre - or 'Kin-slayer.' She had escaped justice at the end of the War, and Rufus still dreamed of bringing her down himself.

"Change is inevitable, Rufus. Of this I have no doubt. But while I will not stand in the way of progress, I am not one to push it forward. You will need to offer me something more than good intentions."

Drake's obstinacy was understandable, if intensely frustrating. But at that moment, Scrimgeour had a sudden realization. It was an idea fraught with peril, but it might offer him the legitimacy he would need to have Fudge's supporters defect.

"What if I said I would put Cornelius Fudge on trial for corruption and willful neglect of the British Magical State?"

Drake's eyes widened at that. "I'd say you were a bit mad, to be honest, Rufus. I have no doubt that Cornelius did not govern effectively, but can you prove his actions were criminal?"

"Yes," Scrimgeour replied, not entirely sure of the truth of that statement. But the stakes were too high to allow political cowardice to stay his hand.

Jericho Drake sat up in his chair, meeting the Minister's eyes. "Rufus, I promise you that if you can convict Cornelius of any substantial crime, I will put my support behind you, on the honor of my family. I will not pretend, however, that I do not find your chances poor. He would be tried before the Wizengamot?"

"Of course. It surprises me, Jericho, that you are so certain that my many allies in that esteemed body would not vote in favor of my case."

Drake smiled thinly. "On the contrary, Rufus, I am supposing that your allies are much too moral themselves to equate a change in the winds of political fortune with a guilty verdict for what could be construed as High Treason."

Scrimgeour nodded, expecting that response. There was little more to be said. "I suppose we shall have to see who knows their friends and allies better, then."

After a few pleasantries and rebuffed attempts at further conversation, Jericho announced that he needed to be elsewhere. When he was gone, Rufus turned to Percy, his mind racing. "Percival, I need a meeting of what I will henceforth refer to as 'the War Council' called within the hour. Please notify Madam Bones, Madam Stoutheart, Mister Smith, Mister Kendrick, Mister Thicknesse, Madam Morrow and," he said with a wry smile, "Cúchulainn."

Percy frowned at the last as he wrote down the names. "Sir? I'm not familiar with that last one."

"You probably know him better as the Head of the Department of Mysteries."

His aide paled. "Sir, with all respect, I do not have the authority to be in contact with him," Percy protested.

"And I am the Minister of Magic. I daresay I can grant you temporary authorization," Rufus said tiredly. "If you would, Percy?"

"Yes, sir!" the redhead declared enthusiastically, hurrying to the fireplace.

Neville nearly knocked over his grandfather's old inkwell as he hurried to write down Professor McGonagall's explanation of Level 2 Switching Spells, driving his already elevated levels of anxiety still higher. Ordinary Wizarding Level exams were approaching with alarming speed, and, to be kind, Neville did not feel prepared.

"Neville," a gentle voice whispered. "You're shaking again."

He looked up embarrassedly to warm chocolate eyes filled with concern, and sighed. "Sorry," he mumbled.

"It's alright," Hermione replied softly, keeping an eye on McGonagall, who was still giving the lecture. She didn't seem to have noticed them, which was unusual enough in itself, but he was very grateful for it. She glanced at Harry for a moment, who was taking down his own notes. "We'll talk later," she whispered.

Touched by her concern, Neville managed to regain his focus, and at least thought he understood the difference between Level 1 and Level 2 Switching Spells. While it might have seemed to be just a matter of scale, the reality was considerably more complex. He had personal experience with the more simple variety; there had been a particularly memorable and unpleasant experience his fourth year when he had accidentally transplanted his own ears onto a cactus, rather than the leaves of the small shrub as was assigned. He'd not only required a trip to the Hospital Wing, but also been the subject of ridicule for weeks. It was just his luck that after two years of Transfiguration with the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs, that year they would be paired with the Slytherins. Harry had offered to take him to the Hospital Wing, but he'd declined the offer out of embarrassment. Harry was just about the only Slytherin of his year that didn't mock and tease him; even Potter's friend Zabini got in on the act occasionally.

Neville had always been a quiet, shy boy. He had also become a dreamer, preoccupied often by what could be, not what was, or what had to be. This was a recent development, and at the heart of it was a deep dissatisfaction with the way his present existence failed to measure up to what he, and everyone else around him, wanted so desperately. Raised on an ancient Lancashire estate, surrounded by older relatives, nearly all of whom had some past claim to notoriety, he had quickly learned that he should not speak out unless he was very sure that what he was to say would be appreciated. Of course, he rarely thought this the case and so spoke very little. His face still flushed with humiliation when Great-Uncle Algie would recount how he had to be 'accidentally' dropped Neville the toddler out a window before it was certain his Augusta's grandson wasn't a Squib. It was a

story Neville retold himself, playing it for laughs, and earning a bit of amused goodwill from his friends and housemates. But there were days when he honestly wondered if he might have been better off being born without magic. What expectations could his Grandmother possibly have laid upon him if she knew he was completely incapable of matching his father's skill and power? His grandmother had her own dreams for him, dreams that Neville feared she would never see realized. He wondered what might have been if she had decided to accept him for what he was, a well-meaning boy with little ambition and even less confidence in his own abilities.

Luna would be ashamed of me, he thought morosely. She was a fellow dreamer, one who had taught him to think in new ways, to see the hope and optimism that dreams could hold, as well as the anxieties and fears. Luna was one of his closest friends, after a fashion. At one point, they might have been romantically involved. Strange as it seemed, he couldn't be sure whether or not that was really the case. They had cuddled, kissed, he had told her that she was pretty and she had purred like a cat. But it had all been playful, innocent. Perhaps it might have been more, but not now. He still had some feelings for the enigmatic Ravenclaw, who had the peculiar ability to say the most ridiculous things at precisely the time that he needed a distraction.

But damned if he knew what those feelings were. He enjoyed her company, surely. He found her appealing, in a quirky, unusual way. But there were times when they simply couldn't communicate, when Luna was simply speaking a different language, a language of speculation and metaphor, a tongue that only she - and on occasion Harry Potter - could understand. Hermione had told him the previous year that she suspected that Luna was a natural Legilimens, that she could instinctively access the unshielded thoughts of others.

It was unnerving, although it did explain how she seemed to be able to articulate what was going through his mind faster than he. Before the conversation would inevitably turn to the migration patterns of Crumple-Horned Snorkacks, of course, and Neville was able to sit back, and breathe, and laugh. And for just for a moment, he could let the pressure of his family's expectations, of his struggles with schoolwork, and his concern over his own personal flaws slide from

his back like a wave rolling back from the beach. In those moments, he was a different person, the person that his friends always insisted that he could be if he just set his mind to it, if he believed in his own self-worth and value, his untapped potential. These words came often from the mouths of Harry, of Hermione, of Ginny, of Professor Sprout, even of Hannah Abbot, a similarly accident-prone Hufflepuff that Sprout had also taken under her wing and now worked regularly with Neville in the greenhouses.

The class bell rang, and Neville felt embarrassment and panic creeping upon him as he realized that his internal reflection caused him to miss a significant part of the lesson. His timing couldn't be worse; Hermione had said that Switching Spells were almost always tested on both the practical and theoretical exams for the subject. There go more of my dreams.

Hermione came up alongside him, and gently laid a hand on his shoulder. She was not a dreamer, not the way that he and Luna were, at least. Hermione was focused on the future as well as the now, but it was the tangible, predictable future. He blushed, ducking his head slightly. "None of that, Neville," his friend said firmly, but with a gentle warmth in her voice that he could not resist. She sighed fondly, smiling at him. "Come on, I promised that we would study for the OWLs together. Why don't we get a start on things before dinner? There's an awful lot of material we need to cover."

Neville nodded, and followed her up to Gryffindor Tower, feeling deeply fortunate to have Hermione there for him. He knew that she was not close to any of the other Gryffindors in their year, remaining a bit of a social outcast even when the majority had finally realized that her friendship with Harry Potter was just that, not some kind of deep betrayal of the scarlet and gold and all it stood for.

Neville was quiet, but he was always watching. It was a defensive mechanism, in some ways – he knew that he was clumsy, and on top of that his thoughts often drifted. Since his first year, when other boys had tried to trick him for their own amusement, had learned to pay attention lest he embarrass himself further.

"You're moping again, Neville," she said gently, her voice motherly.

"No I'm not," he replied instantly. I'm lamenting. There's a difference.

Hermione let out an exasperated sigh, and met his eyes with a skeptical look. "I've known you long enough to see when you are feeling down, Neville. And I definitely know you well enough to tell when you are lying."

Neville shrugged hopelessly as they reached the Fat Lady, who was enjoying a glass of wine with her friend Violet. "Kingsfoot," his friend said clearly.

"Oh, if I must," the red-cheeked woman replied in a put-upon voice. The portrait door swung open, and Hermione stepped into Gryffindor Tower. She glanced back at Neville, who very deliberately clambered through without assistance.

Hermione and he claimed a pair of vacant chairs, and the Muggleborn witch immediately pulled out her books. "So where do you want to start, Neville? There are a few areas where I feel my own grasp of the material is a bit shaky, so we could do those, if you would like. Potions is not one of my strongest subjects, and I think you would do well with some review."

Neville groaned. "Hermione, you can stop pretending that I have any hope of a passing grade on my Potions O.W.L. On any of them, to be honest," he said, his voice nearly falling to a whisper. Those dreams were long gone.

"Well, you won't with that attitude," Hermione said sharply. Neville looked up, more than a little surprised by her tone.

Her expression was hard, but her eyes and tone softened. "Neville. I don't mean to be cross with you, but you really shouldn't get so down on yourself! I know you've had your struggles with classwork, but honestly, it seems like your marks have been good enough. I realize you may hold higher expectations for yourself, but you do need to appreciate that you have limits right now."

Neville was confused. "What do you mean by 'right now'?"

Hermione sighed. "Neville, I've known you for long enough to see that, underneath all of your anxiety and self-doubt, there is an intelligent and capable wizard that escapes once in a while and really shines." She paused, as something seemed to occur to her. "I'm sorry I don't know the answer to this, but how long have you been feeling...down? You've always been a bit melancholy, but I really feel as though it has gotten worse over this year, since you returned from the Christmas holidays. Am I talking sense?"

Neville nodded slowly. "I don't understand it. I'm just not feeling like myself. After what Gran said..." he trailed off, suddenly realizing that he was on the verge of revealing something he would rather not.

Hermione was far too clever for that, however. "What did she say? Neville? Be honest with me, here. You can trust me, you know that."

"She said that I was reminding her of Dad more every passing day."

Hermione blinked. "Well, that's a good thing, isn't it? I've heard that Frank Longbottom was a respected and accomplished Auror."

"But that's just it!" Neville cried in frustration. Several dirty glances came their way from Gryffindors trying to do their homework. "I'm not him! I don't want to be him. I want to realize my own dreams, not his! I thought...I thought when I started showing real promise, when I told Gran about Professor Sprout's comments, that she would realize that I am growing up, and becoming my own man, but..."

"She still wants your father back, doesn't she?" Hermione said softly, a mournful note in her voice.

"Yeah," he breathed.

Hermione closed her eyes. "Oh Neville. I'm so sorry."

"I can't be him. I just can't. I'm not that good at dueling. I can hold my own, sure, but Dad had a reputation around here. And I'm rubbish at Potions, and he and mum were pretty good – had to be, to make it as Aurors. I...I like plants. I like magic that grows in the ground. That's

what I want to do with my life. I want to be a gardener. But...but Gran just won't listen, and so I've tried. I've really tried to make myself Auror material, just so even if I don't choose that path, I can say that I had the chance, but...it's too much, Hermione. My marks have gotten worse this term. It's just not my dream. It's not what I want to do with my life!" He gasped out the last few words, staring hard at the floor.

"I've noticed," she said softly. "And I always see you studying so hard."

"I do, I really do. It's just when it comes time to take exams, I freeze up. I'm so afraid of letting everyone down that I'm not at my best."

He closed his eyes, and felt himself pulled forward into a tight embrace. "Oh Neville," Hermione breathed into his ear. "It's not your fault, it really isn't."

"I just wish I could believe that," he sighed dejectedly.

Hermione moved back, placing her hands on his shoulders.

"Neville, Harry once told me – well, he said that you had so much potential, but you needed to channel it. He thinks you spread yourself too thin, and I have to agree."

He gave her a weak glare. "It's easy for you to say that! You get the best marks in the year! And Harry's not far behind!"

Hermione shook her head. "Neville, it's not all about marks. I'm...I'm good at studying. When I set my mind to a task, when there's certain information I need to learn or understand, I can do that. I'm...gifted, I suppose, in that regard. But that doesn't mean that I don't have a lot of things to work on myself. And Harry...I just wouldn't go comparing yourself to him. He's unique in a lot of ways, and some of them aren't that desirable."

"I know that. I have no desire to be in his place, believe me," Neville assured her.

"I don't think anyone that knows him in the least envies what he has to do," Hermione said solemnly. "Neville, I can't...I can't just tell you to think more of yourself, or to see your obvious talent, or to believe that you can be a great wizard in your own right, just as Neville, not as the youngest of the Longbottom family. Isn't that the dream you should strive for?"

He gawped at her. "You really believe all of that?"

"I do," she said, and with a conviction that even the most cynical part of Neville's psyche could not doubt. He felt a warmth spreading through him, and a smile coming to his face. Hermione smiled back at him, a brilliant sight. Her tangled locks framed her face perfectly at that moment, her eyes shining with an enthusiasm and kindness that almost took his breath away. He felt himself blushing. A new dream, maybe?

He tried to push that thought away.

"Are you alright, Neville?" Hermione asked, looking concerned.

"Never been better," he grinned, trying to avoid further embarrassment in front of his clever friend.

Besides, he did feel pretty brilliant.

War makes strange bedfellows.

As Aiden Greengrass sat confidently before the Minister's desk, sipping gingerly at his piping-hot tea, that aphorism cycled through his mind, a faint whispering in the darkness. There had been a time when the thought of himself and Rufus Scrimgeour in the same room, let alone on the same side of an issue, would have been laughable. This sort of cooperation would have been naught but a dream, and a mad one at that. But the world had become a great deal less predictable since last June.

"I know what you want," Rufus began.

Aiden raised an eyebrow. "Do you now? Do you think you could enlighten me? After all, I've been striving for years to find true happiness."

His attempt at humor went over about as well as expected, but he felt a bit looser.

"Greengrass-

"You really ought to just call me Aiden, Minister. We are on the same side, after all, and quite well acquainted with one another."

"Our previous relationship was nothing short of acrimonious. And while I will admit that I have experienced somewhat of a change of heart with regards to you, you should understand that I am not yet certain whether my feelings are even positive in the majority."

"Surely a step up from outright loathing is a step in the right direction?" Aiden queried. He guessed that Scrimgeour's patience was wearing thin, but, perhaps childishly, he could not bring himself to care. There was a little too much history between them to allow the Minister to get off that easily.

The larger man sat up straight in his chair, hands folded neatly on his lap. The king on his throne, Aiden mused. "If you insist on this nonsense, I will order you expelled from the Ministry. Given what happened the last time you were here, I doubt any will strenuously object."

Aiden cracked his neck. "Alright, then, let's get down to business. My sources tell me that you are putting Cornelius Fudge on trial. Care to comment?"

Scrimgeour looked completely unsurprised. "That has been discussed. At the moment my team is examining the evidence and judging the feasibility of putting together a case against him. Until I am confident that I will not be embarrassed, Cornelius remains a free man."

"A free man with some cause for grievance, I might add."

Scrimgeour nodded. "Certainly. Cornelius is not one to take humiliation lying down. He will be making his moves behind the scenes, seeking to weaken my position, even if he has no hope of regaining the Ministry. He is a problem, and one that must be dealt with in an entirely legitimate, transparent, and public fashion."

"I completely agree," Aiden said. He was being honest – he had learned the rules of wizarding politics at his father's behest, and surely the first thing he had been taught was that you never relied upon the law unless you were sure that you could win. The law could not be broken in an attempt to enforce it.

Aiden appreciated the delicacy of the new Minister's position. Scrimgeour's action was not entirely unprecedented, and it could certainly be argued that a wartime scenario called for action outside of the normal bounds of protocol and procedure. But did a Minister's cowardice call for a coup? That was what everyone was silently (or not-so-silently) wondering. Sarah McGlinchy's unfortunate death had been a public relations fiasco. Rufus looked very bad when his ascension to power was accompanied by the murder of a decorated and respected Auror by a known Dark Wizard. A number of prominent voices in Scrimgeour's camp were calling for the arrest of Jackson Byrnes. To be completely honest, Aiden found himself unsure where he stood on that issue, his schoolboy rivalry with Byrnes aside.

"Do you? Well I suppose you would. You have a great deal riding on me, don't you?"

"I was involved in the operation that gave you this position, Minister. Of course I have reason to be concerned that you remain legitimate in the eyes of the people."

Scrimgeour just nodded. "You know, I could have done it without you, Aiden. Your presence was not necessary, and given the consequences, I find myself wondering if I should have been so quick to involve you. You are dangerous by yourself, Aiden, but your associates are even more so."

It was time to put an end to these verbal games. "If I give you Jackson Byrnes, will you allow me to participate in the case against Fudge?"

Apparently Aiden had managed to catch the Lion off-guard, as his thin eyebrows shot up. "I underestimated you, Aiden. Or perhaps not. How could you possibly deliver on that offer?"

Aiden met his gaze. A more rational part of him screamed that this could be his undoing. But he was a Gryffindor for a reason. His gut told him that this kind of risk, insane as it might seem, could win him the friends on the other side he needed. And if he played this right, he wouldn't risk losing too many on his own side. Maybe he was dreaming – but he couldn't take the risk that he was not. A golden opportunity had arisen, one that he had no intention of letting slip by.

"Do not doubt my resources and capacities, Minister. If I have made this promise to you, it will be kept."

Rufus actually looked surprised. "It'd better be," he growled. "I will need to discuss the matter with the rest of my team – once it is assembled, of course. But know that I will recommend your inclusion, even though the others will undoubtedly start to wonder if I've finally gone mad."

"Perhaps that could work to your advantage?"

Rufus chuckled a bit at that. "There's a thought. It could at that, but probably not within the ranks of my own people. Men like Jericho on the other hand..."

Aiden shrugged. "I feel obliged to point out that the Dark leaders have been underestimating Albus Dumbledore for decades. They seem so shocked when he shows that he really hasn't lost any of his formidable intellect and power from the days of Grindelwald."

"I'm not sure I really want to be compared to Albus," Scrimgeour admitted. "But I suppose that is some sort of compliment."

"More of an encouragement, but I suppose you understand."

"I do," Rufus replied, sighing deeply. "This is going to be an absolute nightmare, you know. I feel as though the public has almost forgotten about the coup because of You-Know-Who's attacks. Bringing up my predecessor on charges will bring it right to the forefront of everyone's minds. And this time, Cornelius will have a platform from which to defend himself."

"And yet you have no choice but to give him one. You are no tyrant, Minister."

"Aren't I?" Rufus asking, laughing mercilessly. "You clearly don't know me well enough, Greengrass." He finished his tea, set down the cup, and folded his hands on his desk. "I'm afraid I will have to ask you to leave me. There are a number of things that I must work out as soon as possible. This has been a very...interesting discussion."

"That it has, Minister. That it has."

Aiden exited the way he'd come, passing through the reception area where he was met with a cold glare from Percy Weasley. The Weasleys were not exactly his favorite family either – the boy's activist father seemed at times to have no regard for tradition or more conservative approaches to managing magical-muggle relations. Arthur's enthusiasm at times bordered on recklessness. His Muggle Protection Act, pushed through with all the righteous fury of a man zealously committed to his cause, had not been – in the view of Aiden and a number of his colleagues – properly revised. It had been far more restrictive on activities involving Dark magic than Light, to the point where Aiden saw it as a vehicle for some of his old political rivals on the other side to paint themselves as progressive supporters of Muggle equality, all the while winning a part of a political battle that had been raging for centuries. But Fudge, tone-deaf as he was, had supported the Act from the start, and ultimately Aiden had been forced to vote against it.

The game of politics was a difficult one, especially when the stakes were often so high.

"Greengrass," a familiar voice stated flatly.

A quick glance revealed the source of the words – the formidable Amelia Bones.

"Amelia," Aiden replied, using her given name.

She gave him a wry smile. "I suppose you must have been discussing the current situation with the Minister? I understand that you intend to be involved in the process of bringing Cornelius Fudge to justice."

"That is a rather kind way of putting it. I intend to ensure that what support he has crumbles, so that Rufus may act without interference from the losers of the coup. Rufus and I may have certain philosophical...differences, but I believe in his leadership, and leadership is exactly what we need if we are to have any chance of surviving this storm."

Amelia nodded, but her look of skepticism did not vanish. "I'm pleased to see that our goals in this regard are similar. It is an unexpected...pleasure to have an opportunity to work with you, Aiden. Far too often I have wished that you might have an untimely demise courtesy of a wild dragon attack or a ritual going wrong."

"I thank you, my dear," Aiden said graciously, genuinely amused. "I believe that means I was doing my job properly as the primary spokesperson for the Dark families."

"Yes, a job that only you ever seemed to want, if I can remember correctly."

"I'll admit that the others have trouble being in the same room as some of your more eminent members, much less sitting through hours of proceedings, vainly negotiating while knowing all the while that eventually Drake, Kendrick, or Sinclair will tire of unneeded compromise and further erode our rights."

"You make it sound like such a joy," Amelia replied. "Aiden, do not misunderstand me. Although at times you represent for me everything that is wrong with our society, fairly or not, I respect you as

a man, and as a wizard. I have no doubt that despite the difficulties that will inevitably arise, you will be an aid to this committee."

She sighed, turning away. "You know, Aiden, I once dreamed that the two of us might be able to come together on something. That the Light and Dark might be able to reach common ground, and allow the Ministry to function as it should, representing the interests of the entire community. I did not dream that such cooperation would come in these shameful circumstances."

"Shameful, Amelia? Far from it. Those interested in the survival of our society have risen up and taken power from those too cowardly to wield it."

Madam Bones gave him a withering glare at that intentionally provocative statement. "It is when you say such things, Aiden, that I wonder how much we really have in common."

Harry dreamed.

He felt himself moving, but his feet weren't hitting the floor. It was a strange sensation, ghost-like as he drifted down a darkened corridor lined with arched doorways and curious objects on marble pedestals. Onward he went, seeming to drift along.

Where am I? What am I doing here?

These questions remained unanswered as he descended into the darkness. Instinctively he grappled with the foreign presence in his mind, imagining his hands taking hold of someone's shoulders, and spinning them around. What he saw in his mind's eye abruptly manifested around him – washing out the corridor with a pale blue light. Something struggled back, pushing him away, and he caught a glimpse of a pale, serpentine face with crimson slits for eyes, and then pain, like a slap on the back that echoed through his mind. Not an attack. Just a warning.

Keep Out.

Confusion overtook him. He struggled to make sense of what was around him, to connect the mental dots to form a coherent and tangible image of what was happening. Again the corridor came into view, and he had gone further, passing dimly lit magical torches that bathed the stones in a faint, pale light. The light was growing stronger, seeming to seep from the walls and ceilings.

Harry did not recognize this place.

Where am I?

The question echoed unanswered into the night, and his progress continued. Abruptly, the world shifted as Harry – or whatever it was that had taken hold of his consciousness, given him unfamiliar eyes to see, ears to hear, fingers to touch – changed directions, passing through a stone archway and into an open chamber. His gaze fell upon more arches, evenly spaced around the roughly-circular room. After a moment of hesitation, he picked the one to the left, coming upon a massive wooden door, which began to dissolve at that instant, the colors washing out and fading, the solid wood coming undone at the seams. Harry pushed through the disintegrating barrier, passing into a much larger chamber, this one with multiple levels, each with its own set of archways. A bright light drew his attention. Emblazoned upon one of the doors above and just to the right was the outline of a bare tree, a sight that looked oddly familiar. He tried to place it, caught a glimpse of another dream, years ago.

Who are you, Harry Potter? a voice groaned around him, causing a shiver to run through his bones.

He began to feel the dream-world slipping away – he was being pulled back, his consciousness drawn away from this place.

Harry resisted. He dug in his heels, and fought back. The room swirled again, and what light there was began to fade, except for the tree, which shone brilliantly as ever.

A snake lunged from the darkness, and Harry, finding himself abruptly in his own body, or something very close to it, stumbled back, searching for his wand. He did not have one. His magic was there,

but distant, far away, as if he had left it in another room and shut the door.

"Who are you?" he demanded, although he had a good guess.

The snake curled, hissing quietly, eyes glowing redder, brighter and brighter, until standing before Harry was a boy slightly taller than he, his own dark hair combed back elegantly, an ethereal crimson glow illuminating his sharp features. His eyes glistened with impossible malice.

"Tom Riddle," he said quietly, answering his own question.

"Hello Harry," the vision before him replied softly, mockingly. "It has been some time."

"Has it?" Harry should have been afraid at that moment. But he could not feel fear. He could barely feel anything. Just the cold, and the dark, and the waves of hatred that were not his own.

But not fear.

"In a manner of speaking," Riddle replied.

"But you aren't the Riddle that I knew, are you?"

The other boy clapped his hands excitedly. "Oh, very good Harry."

"The Diary was destroyed. Daphne purged his spirit. That Riddle is gone."

"Perhaps, Harry. Or perhaps he lives on, in you. Maybe that's why this is possible, why I can speak to you in this way. You are dreaming, Harry."

"I know," the Boy-Who-Lived replied, his mind racing.

"Trying to think your way out? How like you. And to think, I once thought you would be some kind of brazen Gryffindor, filled to the

brim with bravado and entirely empty of common sense. But this is much more interesting, is it not?"

"Why are you doing this?"

"Because I believe you hold the answers to a number of questions Harry. Questions that I have been asking since before you were born."

"What is this place?"

"Well, now you are full of questions, aren't you? This, Harry, is a nexus: a place where your mind and mine can mingle, interact. For now, I intend to keep this interaction more...civil."

"Why not just kill me, then?"

Riddle looked irritated. "Oh believe me Potter, I would if I could. But that's not how this works. But next time that we meet, rest assured that you will not survive the encounter. I'm afraid it was a mistake to underestimate you, and it is not one that I will be making again. But back to our discussion: surely the questions I ask are ones that you want to know, Harry? Wouldn't it be grand if you could discover and understand who you are, what your purpose is? It is there, Harry. There for the taking."

"Do you take me for a fool? Anything that important is something that I would ensure you never lay eyes upon."

Riddle nodded. "That would probably be wise." He smiled viciously.

"You wanted to take it from my mind?"

"It seemed worth a try," Riddle said, shrugging. His expression changed to a powerful longing. "Oh, how I wish I could make you feel pain at this moment Potter. How I wish I could tear you limb from limb, until you delivered the secrets that I seek. But it seems my earlier hypothesis was correct. You know nothing more than I do."

"Then why are you doing this?" A throbbing pain was starting to overcome his concentration. But Riddle couldn't hurt him. Then what's happening? He grunted.

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry, Harry," Riddle sneered, his eyes flashing crimson. "I'm afraid I was lying about not be able to harm you. I made certain of that."

His wrists were frozen in invisible restraints, and Riddle came closer, a vicious grin cruelly splitting his handsome features. The pain built, layer upon layer, a hammering in his mind. Then another pain, sharper, from his forehead. From his scar. And at that moment Harry remembered why he had that scar. Why he hadn't died on that terrible Halloween night in 1981.

A mother's love. One who had saved him. And then the one who had shown him what it was to be cared for, looked after, and cherished. Daphne's face flashed before his eyes. And he heard something, something faint but discernible...phoenix song?

Emboldened, Harry began to push back. He drew strength from love, he knew that. Voldemort didn't. It was the nature of someone so driven by nothing but hatred, contempt, and fear. Oh yes, Voldemort could feel fear...

He reached out, grappling with the dark consciousness before him, seizing it, and squeezing.

"Potter!" his adversary screeched, clapping a hand to his own forehead. Now Riddle staggered, falling to his knees. He looked up, and Harry saw a bizarre pattern of bloody lines in the same place where Harry had his own scar. A tree? Riddle roared in agony, and the world they stood in shattered into fragments of light.

A/N: I'm back after an extended absence. Sorry about that. Senior year of college is not conducive to a tremendous amount of fanfic writing. Lots of new ideas, and some editing progress made on *Philosopher's Stone*, but not much progress being made. So I can't make many promises regarding further updates.

Regarding the editing of PS, there was a small detail change that's been made in one of the more recently updated chapters that appeared in this chapter - the tree Harry sees in his dream. I had been trying *not* to retcon things in my editing, but there's certain elements of the mythos that just didn't exist back when PS and SH were written. It won't be important for a while now.

As for this chapter, there was lots of politicking. Scrimgeour is a very interesting character as I've chosen to write him (I think he had a lot of potential in canon, if Harry wasn't allergic to politics). His relationship with Aiden is *really* fun to write. I hope his characterization is relatively strong - I really like him, and he's got some important roles to play.

Neville is a character I've neglected for a while. I tried to advance his development significantly in this chapter. This is the first POV we've seen of his since the end of the fourth installment.

So yes, the dream dynamic is quite different. Harry *is* closer on Voldemort's level mentally, due to well, practice, but that's not all of what is going on. This time, Harry got some help. A good thing, because Harry's curiosity and occasional hubris mean that he's focusing less on keeping Voldemort out and more on besting him. We'll see if that turns out to be a poor decision. Do remember that, to this point, the prophecy still speaks of 'the power he knows not.' It works differently than in canon, but Voldemort remains vulnerable to the feelings that he no longer experiences. Still, this Harry is quite different from his canon counterpart, and, well, I'm a fan of Doctor Who writer Steven Moffat. Timey-wimey, and all that. ;)

We're continuing to head for the endgame. I can't promise a colossal departure from canon, but that's partially because I actually *liked* the Department of Mysteries part.

Chapter 20: Tests and Trials

Harry drifted in the void.

A searing, blinding light hit him, and he recoiled in alarm. But as the white glow washed over him, he felt warmth and caring, and the ghost of familiar music...

Notes of phoenix song danced through his mind, banishing the cold and the dark, and he followed them upwards, reaching for the light...

Harry awoke with a start, jerking violently. He retched, rolling onto his side, then felt a pair of hands on his shoulders. He stiffened before he heard a muttered, "Be still, Potter, for Merlin's sake." The unmistakable voice of his Head of House brought him back to reality, and he became aware that Snape was leaning across his bed, staring into his eyes with serious concern.

Harry's stomach roiled, and he twisted himself to get an angle. The Potions Master stepped back as he recognized the signs, and watched impassively as Harry lost his battle with nausea on the dungeon floor. He waved his wand impatiently, and the sick was gone. "Are you alright, Harry?" he asked.

He used my first name, Harry thought. He never does that.

"Well enough, sir," Harry replied, though it was more of a croak.

"Potter, what you just experienced is well beyond my knowledge. Professor Dumbledore is aware of your situation. Do you require assistance?"

Harry, still shaking a bit, swung his legs out of his damp sheets and touched down on the cold stone. Snape put an arm around him, a curiously warm gesture from the man who had made his life a living hell just four years earlier. He looked up into the older man's haunted eyes, and saw genuine worry. It was shocking, in a way. "Thank you," Harry breathed.

"Come," he said, and led Harry through the silent corridors of the Slytherin Dormitory, mercifully empty of other students. This was not something Harry was terribly inclined to explain to any curious onlookers.

They continued out through the Common Room. "Where are you taking me, sir?"

Snape glanced down at him. "The Headmaster is aware of your ordeal. It was he who informed me to retrieve you. I do not make a habit of loitering around the dormitories without cause."

Harry quietly doubted that. He felt his strength slowly returning to him, even as the cold air of the dungeons chilled his sweat-drenched body. He took up more of his own weight in his steps and felt Snape's arm let go. He was still touched by his one-time adversary's gesture, but the arrangement seemed to suit both of them better.

Filch scowled at them as he stood in a corner with Mrs. Norris, but said nothing. Even to Harry's addled mind, the loathing between the Caretaker and the Potions Master was blatantly oblivious. Snape threw a disdainful half-smirk, half-sneer at the Squib, and Mrs. Norris hissed loudly.

After another couple of winding staircases and corridors, they finally found themselves at the gargoyles who guarded the entrance to the Headmaster's office. Frederick, as Daphne had called him a lifetime ago, seemed to smile faintly at Harry as he approached, and then moved aside without a word.

Harry preferred to support himself once they reached the top of the stair, though his Head of House had offered a bit of welcome assistance during the climb itself. Still reeling, his muscles feeling fatigued and weak, Harry knocked on the great oak doors. They slid open of their own accord. Albus Dumbledore stood in front of his desk, wearing midnight blue robes and a nightcap. "My dear Harry, are you alright?"

"I will be," he replied. "Just a bit shaken up." He looked up to meet the old man's eyes. "You knew?"

Dumbledore smiled slightly, but his eyes showed nothing of mirth, devoid of their usual amused twinkle. "Of course. I knew the risk that Lord Voldemort might soon attempt to exploit your mental connection, and so I was prepared. While you made a good account of yourself, Harry, you were not without help on this night. I must admit, however, that I was not entirely expecting what I saw."

Harry parsed the man's words. "Entirely expecting?"

"Indeed," Dumbledore replied, looking thoughtful. "I have suspected for some time that Tom would attempt to access the Prophecy. Do you know where he took you, in the beginning?"

Harry didn't, but he could guess. "The Ministry...the Department of Mysteries?"

The Headmaster nodded. "Precisely. You are aware of what can be found there."

"Prophecies. All of those that the Ministry has on record. Including the one that concerns myself and Voldemort."

"To be entirely accurate, it concerns Lord Voldemort and a young boy who meets a specific set of criteria, but given the way events unfolded, yes, it is you that the Prophecy speaks of."

"Daphne told me a few years ago, but blocked the words from my mind."

Snape looked horrified. "Had that woman lost her last grip on sanity?" he hissed.

"As Daphne explained it, she no longer wished to keep the knowledge of Harry's destiny from him," Dumbledore replied. "I did not agree with her course of action. Fortunately, events of the past few years have strengthened your magic such that you are able to resist any long-range attempts by Lord Voldemort to enter your mind. Face-to-face, however, I am not so certain that you would be

successful. Your mental abilities are extremely potent, Harry, but quite raw and unfocused."

"Despite my best efforts," his Head of House said pointedly.

"I am aware of your difficulties," Dumbledore replied. "I had been considering taking you on as a pupil, Harry, until it became evident to me that I do not have the sort of training that would be required."

"I don't understand," Harry replied. "Professor, I've heard it said that you are one of the most powerful wielders of mind magic alive today."

"And so it is. However, Harry, I developed my skills as an extension of my own power, a separate gift. Since your encounter with Riddle at the end of your second year, your magic has grown by such leaps and bounds that it works by different rules. You are granted abilities simply because you reach the magical threshold necessary to force them into existence. This is how you are capable of wandless magic, despite your lack of formal instruction or and no signs of a remarkable gift for it before Riddle's power merged with yours."

Harry felt his strength finally returning to him, and with it, his senses. "You hadn't told me any of this before."

Dumbledore nodded, looking over his half-moon glasses. "Harry, simply because we have not spoken frequently in the last few months, do not assume that I have been idle with regards to your situation. I have many friends, scattered widely across this world, who have delved into the workings and properties of magic far deeper than time has ever allowed me. An Iranian wizard, Abu Bakr, provided most of the information that I just gave you. I do hope you have a chance to meet him someday – he's a truly brilliant individual, quite unrecognized - and a fantastic cook."

Dumbledore smiled lazily in the way he did when he was trying to defuse the tension of a situation. His blue eyes twinkled. Somehow, that calmed Harry just as seeing the Headmaster so utterly serious had unnerved him.

"I appreciate your efforts, Professor. I realize that the special circumstances of my life present some major...difficulties."

"Quite, Harry. However, I would ask that you come to my office next week at a time of your choosing, and we can explore the extent and limitations of your mental magic. It is of utmost importance that you hone these particular skills, Harry, or you will find yourself at a severe disadvantage when you next encounter Lord Voldemort."

Snape had stood silent for some time, something that was unusual in itself. His shoulder were slumped, his eyes lowered, almost...submissive, resigned. He looked...defeated, somehow. "Professor, is everything alright?"

His Head of House raised an eyebrow. "Not at all, Potter, but only some of that has anything to do with you. I must admit to being frustrated by encountering magic of which I lack any understanding. The Headmaster's theories may help to explain some of the...oddities, for lack of a better term, that I encountered during our Occlumency sessions." He turned to Dumbledore, the fire back in his eyes. "Perhaps it would be wise, Headmaster, to explain to Potter the frankly terrifying dangers that the nature of his power pose to his mental stability."

That was worrying. Harry heard a bit of fear creep into his voice as he asked, "Professor?"

Dumbledore sighed deeply, the lines on his face deepening. "Harry, I know you have been hiding certain developments from me, and be certain that I do understand your reasons. But past events, as well as my own observations and a bit of guesswork lead me to believe that you are already suffering some ill-effects from your magic. Unless I am mistaken, you have...experienced your magic...taking on a life of its own, so to say? An alternate consciousness, one that feeds upon baser emotions?"

"Yes," Harry replied softly.

Snape cut in. "The Headmaster and I have discussed this matter, mostly for the purpose of determining if there are any potions that

might aid you. There are a few possibilities I am researching with interest, but bare in mind that all potions are, at best, temporary solutions."

Harry nodded, then finally asked the question that had been eating at him. "Professor, is it possible that I shouldn't be fighting against this...entity? I...I admit what I've seen has been rather frightening, but is it not possible that I should accept it as a part of myself?"

What little mirth had lingered in Dumbledore's eyes during this discussion promptly vanished. "It is a part of you, Harry. You cannot escape it...As for your question, I cannot answer that for you. You alone know your own strength, your own capabilities."

"It is possible that by embracing your darker alter ego, you may gain access to magical power otherwise denied you," Snape said curtly. "But it is also possible that in so doing, you would be...damaged." He paused, and locked his gaze with Harry's. "Potter, what research exists on the subject suggests that wizards and witches are born with an inherent power threshold, a capacity for wielding magic that exists at birth and cannot be significantly exceeded, regardless of training. By absorbing the power contained Dark Lord's diary, itself an early and somewhat primitive attempt to create an alternate...soul, I suppose would be the word, you have doubled or tripled the amount of magic your body would have given you naturally. You would have been a perfectly competent wizard, but it would not have been your power that you were remembered for. That has changed."

"Thank you, Severus. If you would, Harry, allow me to test a theory?"

Keeping his gaze locked with the Headmaster's, Harry cautiously nodded.

Dumbledore produced a crystal orb with four ornately carved points mounted on a polished stone base. "I will need you to relax. This will allow me to measure your magical potential. I have been trying to acquire one of these for several years, and finally succeeded a month ago after a dear friend from South Africa passed on. When he learned of your situation, he bequeathed it to me without hesitation."

Harry closed his eyes, and felt tendrils of magic reaching out, washing over his torso, penetrating through his skin. He felt a burning sensation near the back of his neck, and fought to remain still. Then it was gone. He opened his eyes expectantly.

The orb glowed a brilliant scarlet with waves of violent light arcing around the edges. Dumbledore looked impressed. "Your magical power is significantly higher than it should be. As I suspected, that has had some serious consequences. You have a double magical core."

"And what does that mean?" Harry asked, feeling a lump in his throat and a nervous sweat breaking out on his forehead. Snape's lips were pressed together tightly; he looked worried, which was never a good sign.

Dumbledore shook his head. "I wish I could give you a more complete explanation, Harry, but this is beyond my realm of experience. Make no mistake, the magic is all yours, both that with which you were born and that which you acquired unnaturally. However, you are over capacity, to put it in simple terms. Your original core is saturated with magical power, but the excess power must be anchored somewhere. Hence, an additional nexus of magical energy within your body."

Harry nodded. "Is this a sustainable arrangement? Are these two cores mutually co-existent?"

"Possibly," Dumbledore said. "Although the magic within us is alive, to some extent, and having a separate entity may well..." he shook his head. "I cannot be certain, but you seem stable...magically, at least, at this time. Severus may be able to help you... but again, I know little of this subject. Nonetheless, I believe it can only be to your advantage if you learn to discipline your mind and control your emotions. Do you consent to additional work with myself or Professor Snape?"

Harry paused for longer than he expected. "I do. Teach me what you can, please."

Dumbledore nodded, looking content. Still, there was an uneasiness in his smile, as if he knew all too well that he might have set himself the challenge of a lifetime.

"Harry, I will not allow myself to be strung along like a poodle on a lead."

"...I don't understand."

"Of course you don't understand, that's the problem."

Giselle Reisor's words were still ringing in his ears a day later, an unwelcome and probably unneeded complication in his already difficult existence. Another letter from Aiden had been somewhat encouraging, as the man had sworn the continued support of his family, and his daughter had made the gesture of delivering it herself. She was still very cool towards him, but he was certainly not alone in feeling that peculiar chill of her affections. The only time she ever seemed to smile was around Theodore Nott.

All of that aside, Harry felt a building pressure to get out of Hogwarts and actually do something. There was a war on, though Voldemort and his forces had been quiet since the attack on Azkaban, and the later attempt on Harry's own life. The only conclusion that could be reached was that the Dark Lord was biding his time, gathering his own allies, and any moment now, he might set the wizarding world alight.

But that conversation with Giselle was bothering him pretty badly. He thought he had been clear that he was not interested in any kind of romantic entanglement. Apparently he was mistaken.

She sounded really jealous of Ginny, Harry mused.

How Harry was supposed to deal with the emotional complications and drama that came with being fifteen years old was completely beyond him. A part of him wanted to go back to Ginny and see if anything might be salvaged from the mess that he had made of things. Her words at the Three Broomsticks had astounded him. It

was testament to Ginny's character that she had done anything but avoid him since he had nearly killed her in a fit of unbridled rage.

He would never forgive himself for that.

And all over Daphne. It was always about Daphne.

His guardian had vanished entirely. Aiden's sources indicated that she had been tracked to the North, but had then evaded further efforts at surveillance or apprehension by the Aurors. It came as somewhat a relief to know that Scrimgeour had vetoed the use of Hit-Wizards, even with Capture-Only orders.

Harry asked himself what Daphne could possibly mean to accomplish. It seemed as though she had been on the move, even though it might not have been necessary. Surely she could have laid low at one place or another? Daphne was engaged in some quest, but to what end, only she knew.

Harry felt a familiar tug on his mind when he exited Snape's office two days later. In his bag were two potions, both normally used to reduce symptoms of mental instability, only slightly modified by the castle Potions Master.

"I cannot promise these will work, Potter, but I assure you that I will continue to research this problem. I ask in return that you submit to me in writing a report of any unusual or unexpected symptoms, as well as a self-evaluation of your mental state. And if you do happen to have any more early morning visitations with the Dark Lord, well, I needn't tell you that you should not keep them to yourself."

Harry moved towards his dormitory, intent on a badly-needed lie-down.

The familiar voice came again into his mind.

Come play with me, Harry Potter.

He smiled despite himself, and gathering his thoughts, headed out onto the grounds, crossing the wooden covered bridge and

descending one of the steep hills that surrounded the castle. He found Luna exactly where he expected her, at the base of a small cliff, surrounded by trees and creatures that few others could see.

"Do you ask the house-elves for that?" he queried, gesturing to the bucket at the petite Ravenclaw's feet, containing small chunks of raw meat. A Thestral eagerly snatched up the one she was holding in her hand.

"Hagrid, actually," Luna replied with her back turned, wiping her hands on her robes. She turned, smiling at his approach. "I have missed you, Harry." She skipped up to him and wrapped her slender arms around him, resting her dirty blond head against his chest, purring contentedly. Laughing a bit, Harry leaned into her, squeezing gently.

Luna let go and skipped away before sitting down on a moss-covered boulder. "You're troubled, Harry."

"It's nothing important."

"Of course it's important," she replied softly. "Everything is important to some degree," she told him, smiling faintly. "Else we wouldn't bother thinking about it. There's a difference between what is important, and what we feel should be important. You feel that you should be thinking about fighting a war. But that isn't what's bothering you, is it, Harry?"

He shook his head. "I wish you wouldn't do that."

"I know, which is why I didn't," she said matter-of-factly.

Harry looked up at her. "Truly?"

Luna sighed and giggled slightly. "You really are a bit daft sometimes. I don't always need to look into your thoughts to know what's bothering you. You are who you are, Harry, for better or worse. You let yourself be defined by the expectations placed upon you, but inside, you are still the lost and confused boy. But you don't like to think about it that way, do you?"

"I'm not a boy," Harry sighed. "I stopped being a boy years ago."

"That's what you tell yourself, and what others tell you. But it's not really true, is it?" Luna's pale blue eyes seemed to pierce every defense he had. "It's okay to be scared, Harry. And to be confused. Because you are just a boy."

"Giselle said that I had to renounce Daphne," he said bitterly. "That unless I could free myself from the shadow of the Grey Maiden, I could never reach my fullest potential. She said that I had to confront her, to say to her face that I did not condone her actions, that I could not."

Luna said nothing.

"I don't know if I should abhor what's she's done," Harry continued. "Sure, she's broken the rules, she's committed crimes – but she's rid this world of Death Eaters, of evil and ruthless men who will stop at nothing to see their Lord triumph."

"The world cannot be divided up into good and evil, Harry," Luna said.

"Do you think I don't know that?" Harry snapped. "But what is a man like Thomas Avery if not evil? He killed a pair of Muggleborn boys, four and six, in order to send a message to a team of Aurors. He slit their throats and branded them like cattle with the word 'Mudblood,' left them naked for the authorities to find in a backstreet of Diagon Alley. He and Lucius Malfoy raped and murdered Marlene McKinnon, tortured her husband half to death, and hung their two-month old child from the rafters like some sort of sick piñata. And then he escaped justice, buying off a prosecutorial team, and flawlessly rehabilitating his image by buying St. Mungo's a new wing. He acted like he'd changed, but he hadn't. What's so wrong about Daphne giving him what he's had coming: an agonizing death of his own?"

Luna stared blankly. "I can't answer that question. But I can tell you that the idea still frightens you. Just like the idea that your friends might get closer than you would like."

"And what if I can't afford that?" Harry asked, bit sharply. "What if I can't afford any kind of immaturity, fear, or emotional complications? There's a war on, Luna. I can't afford to be distracted by uncertainty, not even concerning the woman who I called a mother, much less petty teenage drama." He sighed. "I'm under enough pressure as it is. Did you know that Giselle accused me of leading her on, and then when I told her I didn't want that, she said I was just hung up on Ginny? I felt something for Ginny...hell, I suppose I still do feel something for her. But that was another time. That was before this world began to go straight to hell."

"Before Voldemort came back from the dead as you watched, helpless," Luna finished. She cocked her head and blinked. "That's all very admirable, Harry. Did you know that Yaddlygors spend their entire lives celibate, and then mate just before they die? They are very curious creatures, and rare, as you'd expect – father says he would spend our entire fortune for one chance to see two of them mating. Is that the life that you want, Harry? A life of passionless duty and emotional detachment, until you've just about run out of time?"

"I don't know that I can choose anything else," Harry said softly.

The Ravenclaw hopped off her perch and walked over to him.

"I do love you, you know," Luna said brightly. "Always have, and always will."

Harry started. "What do you mean?"

She giggled again. "Oh gods, but you are suspicious, aren't you? How can I help but love you..." Her voice was gentle and soothing, and she reached out to touch his face with a delicate, pale hand, running her fingers over the half-grown stubble at his jaw. A shiver coursed through his entire body, and for an instant, his entire purpose slipped. "...when no one else can understand me the way that you do?"

"Luna," he hissed between clenched teeth, seething. "Did you not just hear what I was saying?"

Luna stroked his cheek and smiled lazily. "I did. But you misunderstand. It happens, you should not fret about that."

Harry took a deep breath. "So what were you saying?"

"That I love you," she said simply. "Nothing more, nothing less. That's alright, isn't it?"

Deep breaths, Harry told himself. Alright, so Luna hadn't just confessed her love for him...in that way, at least. He supposed that he ought to be grateful. Luna returned to her stump, giving him the space that she surely knew he needed at that moment.

Harry closed his eyes. "I don't want to hurt anyone. Certainly not the way I hurt Ginny. I'm dangerous." He looked straight at her now, trying to burn through her dazed exterior by sheer force of will. "When people are around me, they get burned. I nearly killed Ginny, and then nearly got her killed just a few weeks ago, just by her being with me at the wrong moment."

"So you would drive away all your friends?" Luna asked softly. "You would fight on your own? Then you would lose, Harry Potter. And we would lose. And you know that, which is why you will never cast us aside."

"I suppose I do," he said, nearly in a whisper. He thought of Hermione, everything she had been through. She had been anxious, she had been frightened. But she had never refused him when he needed her. Not really. Ginny had been given fewer opportunities to prove herself, but though she might have flinched, she had never fallen down.

"But friends..."

"Is there really a difference, in the end, between friends and lovers?" Luna asked. "Certainly, there are some things that can only be shared with lovers, but is it not also true that there are things that can only be shared with friends? Where does one draw the line, Harry Potter? If a friend is devoted and caring, but does not share a passionate kiss with you, does that make them less important?"

"Of course not," Harry said defensively. "Luna, its not that simple. There are certain...ties, bindings between two people that love one another in body and soul."

Luna stared blankly at him. "And how would you know that, Harry?" Her tone suggested she knew the truth of that statement no more than him.

I wouldn't, his mind echoed back at him. He had shared something deep and special with Ginevra Molly Weasley? Had he loved her? Probably. Had he been in love with her? Probably not. Theirs had been the love of the young, innocent in its curiosity, even its lust for intimacies forbidden but not dared. But by shared kisses, by letting him hold her during long, cold nights in the Slytherin Common Room, had Ginny surpassed someone like Hermione, who had been there from the beginning, from the darkest days of his First Year, in the depths of his heart? That was madness, he knew. Hermione would never be his lover. They were too different now, too divided upon moral quandaries and principles. And he had never felt anything resembling lust for the Gryffindor. She was pretty, of course; her teenage years (and the removal of her braces) had been kind to her.

"You're confused," Luna said, smiling. "That's good."

"How is that good?" Harry asked, genuinely frustrated.

"Because when we are certain of things, we become arrogant. It is not necessary to doubt, just to realize that, even just rarely, we might be wrong."

There was wisdom in that, Harry could see. He smiled bitterly. "That's good advice."

Luna shrugged. "I get lucky once in a while."

"You're far too modest," he said. He closed his eyes again. Luna's gaze had a way of knocking him off kilter when he was trying to say something difficult. "Giselle's right, though. Sooner or later, Daphne is going to come back into my life. And I need to be ready for that moment. And whether I condemn her or congratulate her, I cannot let

that chance escape." He opened his eyes and met Luna's. "I owe her that much, at least."

Luna tilted her head. "It would seem you have made that decision, then."

"After a fashion."

"I will be there for you, if you want me."

Harry looked at the girl opposite him, sitting leisurely on a stump, leaning back with her hands braced beneath her, her blue eyes gazing upon him with an insistent curiosity. Luna was one of the strangest people he had ever met. And yet she was, of the many he had spoken to at length, possibly the one he related the most to, as barmy as it sounded.

"I would like that," he said at last, his mouth suddenly a bit dry. "That's very kind of you."

"You are my friend, Harry Potter. Friends are there for each other in times of difficulty. I think this is probably one of those times."

Harry nodded.

"You must know what you are going to say, you know. Daphne knows you better than anyone, and she is very good at showing you what you want to see. And you are very good at seeing only what you desire. If you are unsure, you will be silent. You may speak at length, but you won't be saying anything."

"How can I do that?"

Luna hopped off her perch, and skipped towards him. She stopped and placed her hand on his chest. "Look here, Harry, and you will know."

With one last smile, she turned back towards the Thestrals. "They are always so quiet. And yet they say everything that they need to." She turned back to him. "Would that we were all like that."

"Pass the toast, would you?"

Hermione complied, her eyes still fixed upon the unrolled scroll in front of her, nearly every inch of it covered in notes, formulas, incantations, and diagrams.

Ginny sat opposite them, the Daily Prophet open and her breakfast untouched. Blaise sat beside her, glancing at his Potions textbook as he scooped up his breakfast potatoes. Neville was not even bothering to eat, frantically scribbling notes from the Transfiguration text. Luna was reading the Quibbler upside down. As he watched, she flipped it clockwise, holding it above the table with one hand while she gulped down her juice with the other. Peter Lowry sat sullenly next to the Ravenclaw, picking at his food. Ginny had threatened to hex him if he didn't start eating regularly. A little way down the Ravenclaw table where they were all assembled, Mandy Brocklehurst, Terry Boot, Lisa Turpin, Padma Patil, and Anthony Goldstein were consulting in excited whispers.

Today was the day. The beginning of their Ordinary Wizarding Examinations, and a day that Hermione had been preparing for since her first class at Hogwarts. Long ago, Harry had competed with Hermione for the best marks in the class. A combination of harder curriculums, more focus on events beyond the walls of the castle, and sheer exhaustion had put an end to that. Hermione had plowed on, her scholarly zeal entirely unaffected by the world-shaking events swirling about them.

The last month had passed in a flurry of getting caught up on schoolwork, writing letters to Aiden, working with Dumbledore, and worrying about his guardian. Somehow, these examinations had sneaked up on him, and he was less prepared than he might have liked.

"How are you feeling about your exams?" Hermione asked, for the eighth time in the last week. She glanced at her sheet, bit her lip, and then whispered something entirely inaudible under her breath.

Harry suppressed a yawn. He had not slept well the past few nights. There had been more dreams of the corridors of the Department of Mysteries, more whispers of what might be found there. He was actively trying to keep Voldemort out of his mind, but their connection, mysterious as it was, was such that that was never entirely possible. Voldemort could show him what he wished, when he wished. But if Harry fought back, he could drive him away. It was a game, now, cat-and-mouse in the landscape of dreams.

He turned his attention back to the matter at hand. "Well enough, I reckon. I've got the Charms material down, I'd reached NEWT-level Potions before Snape said I should stop, and as scattered as our Defense education has been so far..."

"...I don't think you'll need to worry too much," Hermione finished. "It's Potions and Transfiguration I'm most worried about."

"Hermione, you are first in the class in Transfiguration, and only beyond Elisha Moon in Potions. You're better than me right now."

"That doesn't mean anything," Hermione insisted. "I could excel in all of my classes and still forget enough to do poorly on one of my examinations! This determines what upper-level classes we'll be allowed to take, Harry! You can't seriously be suggesting that I put anything less than my greatest effort into these!" She was almost hysterical at this point.

"I don't think Harry is, Hermione," Ginny said wryly.

"Thanks, dear," he said, throwing her a glare. Ginny flinched, and he instantly regretted it. She's still frightened of me. Well, going by what Dumbledore said, she's got good reason.

He knew why "Kalas" existed now. He was no closer to understanding what he might do with that knowledge.

"You know yourself, Harry," Luna muttered. "Ooh, I knew I was doing that wrong." She laid the Quibbler open on the table and scratched out something frantically. Then she took her wand from behind her

ear and tapped it on the page. It glowed with a flash of brilliant yellow, and she smiled widely.

Hermione had frowned at the Ravenclaw's first words, but was then occupied trying to blink away the spots that had probably just appeared in her vision.

"...that can't be good," Ginny said softly.

"What?" Harry and Hermione asked at once.

"Take a look," she said, offering them the Prophet with a unhappy expression.

Hermione grabbed the paper, and Harry glanced over her shoulder. The item in question was buried six pages back, in a small box of text with no accompanying image. But Harry immediately understood what had Ginny so worried.

Break-In at the British Museum: Darvish Strikes Again?

London, UK

Aurors and Security personnel alike are baffled by the disappearance of several magical items of great antiquity held in the country's largest magical collection of historic artifacts. Rumors persist that at least one of the objects taken has connections to one or more of the legendary Founders of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, but authorities have not issue any further information. It is further suspected that the burglary, which was detected a full two days after the event, was perpetrated by notorious thief and suspected ally of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, the Mole, Wesley Darvish. Mr. Darvish was one of many prisoners missing after a shocking attack on the island prison of Azkaban late last year, and had been serving a 40-year sentence following his third conviction for grand larceny and trespassing.

"Well, that could mean a lot of things," Hermione said slowly. "We shouldn't jump to conclusions."

The corner of Ginny's mouth twitched. "Any time that something associated with the Founders ends up in You-Know-Who's hands, it's probably safe to worry. Any idea what it could be?"

"Not a clue," Harry admitted.

"The Library ought to have a fairly recent copy of the Museum catalog," Hermione said. "I'll do some digging and see what I can come up with. After OWLs, of course."

"After?"

"Well, not after all of them," she clarified, sounding agitated. "I won't leave this sitting for two weeks."

"I'll do it," Ginny volunteered. "I've just got my regular end of term exams coming up, and I've got little else to do."

"Your studies are important as well, Ginny," Hermione insisted.

"I know that," Ginny replied, looking somewhat mutinous. "But how I do on my exams in a few weeks won't be determining my future studies at Hogwarts. It makes sense that I should take the risks. Plus, I've always wanted to do more digging in the library. Between Quidditch and everything else, I so rarely have cause or opportunity."

That was another thing. Gryffindor and Slytherin had finished the year tied, though Slytherin held the tiebreaker after their close win in the late January snows. But the Chasers of Gryffindor had just finished a season for the ages, where they broke nearly every scoring record on the books. The end result was that Slytherin's lead was within the point window, and a rare event, a Slytherin-Gryffindor winner-take-all championship match, was scheduled for the Sunday after their last OWL. Pucey was all over him about his failure to show up for the previous two practices, going so far as threatening to bench him and replace him with Ginny. The redhead told him privately that if Pucey did that, she would refuse to fly at any position.

Years ago, Quidditch had been damn near everything, one of his few chances to distinguish himself except in unwanted ways and quite

possibly his only chance to win the respect and affection of his Housemates. Now, with the war and everything else, the game felt increasingly like yet another luxury he couldn't afford. Harry had spent the time he gained from missing those practices discussing the werewolf situation with Remus – which had deteriorated, due in no small part to re-emergence of the infamous Morrigan Kane, better known as 'Fiacre' or, the Welsh translated, 'Kin-Slayer' and what appeared to be a small pack of her own.

The pieces were beginning to move on the great chessboard, some in the open, some in the shadows. And here Harry was, stuck in school, struggling to keep up with his studies, increasingly neglecting his friends and teammates. The events around him screamed for him to grow up, to mature on the spot, to make the flawless and rapid transition from fifteen-year old Hogwarts student to the fabled leader who would unite Light and Dark, and, by the way, defeat the greatest Dark Lord in centuries.

He caught Ginny looking at him, concern in her warm brown eyes. In the past she might have reached out for a reassuring hand clasp, or given him a kiss on the cheek when they left for classes, or joked about the latest news from her harried mother, now forced to deal with the entrepreneurial-minded Weasley twins.

She said nothing, and began to eat her porridge.

Harry would have felt the pain in his soul if he had the time.

"This is hopeless," Neville muttered.

"Of course it isn't!" Hermione insisted, turning to her Housemate with an exasperated expression on her face. "Neville, we've been over this. Did you make a review sheet like I told you?"

"Yes, but..."

"And do you feel comfortable with most of the material on that piece of parchment?"

"Most of it, but..."

"Then you are going to be alright." She laid a gentle hand on his arm. "Really, Neville, I don't know what to do with you sometimes...and don't you dare apologize! You're my friend, possibly my only real friend in Gryffindor, and I'm going to get you through these exams if it kills you. Or me," she finished, emphatically taking a bite of toast.

Neville had something akin to awe in his eyes. He nodded quickly. Hermione smiled, and let go. She pointed at the book he was reading. "Put that away, Neville, you don't have time to re-read the entire book, and everything you need to know you've already written down."

"But what if the examiner asks me something that isn't here? I think one of them is Griselda Marchbanks, and she knows my Gran, and probably thinks that I'm a whole lot better at everything than I really am. What if she asks me something that I didn't think to study?"

Hermione frowned. There was something pained in her voice when she said gently, "Well, if that happens, you admit defeat, say or write as much as you can, move on, and do better on the next one."

Ginny raised an eyebrow. "I swear I just heard Hermione say it was alright to not answer a question fully. I think my hearing is going."

The Muggleborn sighed. "Even I am capable of being realistic once in a while."

"I know, just winding you up," Ginny said, winking.

Harry mentally reviewed his own schedule. O.W.L.s would start with Charms, first the written examination and then the practical. They might be asked to perform anything from basic Levitation Charms to a self-applied Glamour if the examiner was particularly tough. Harry ran through a short-list of incantations, spells, and wand movements. He grinned slightly when Hermione insisted he properly 'swish and flick,' for an instant reminded of the class which had set up their friendship, when Hermione had been driven to tears by Ronald Weasley. Later that night, Harry had nearly died saving Hermione from a troll. The rest was history.

Later in the week would be Transfiguration, Herbology, Defense, and Ancient Runes, which had proved to be increasingly interesting as the year had worn on. They had not gotten far beyond basic concepts and alphabets yet, but Professor Ogola assured them that they would begin studying rune circles and talismans in her advanced class. The oldest magic relied upon the written, not the spoken, word, and a mastery of runes (and in some cases, Arithmancy) was absolutely essential for understanding and manipulating magical wards, cooperative spellcasting, and other potentially vital skills.

The exams went as well as could be expected. Charms was relatively easy, all things considered – the most difficult thing he was asked to do was a Cheering Charm, which was only a hardship because Harry had flat out forgotten the incantation and wand movement. After a couple of tries, Harry had remembered enough to cast a decent one. Transfiguration was, as always, a challenge. The written was not a terrible ordeal, with his only problem being his inability to remember the third of Louis Chamelionis's laws of Transfiguration. He performed a basic switching spell with a minimum of effort, earning a pleasant smile from Professor Tofty. Herbology was not his best subject, and he found himself wishing he had studied more as he ground through the written exam. During the practical portion, he was able to prune and feed the Fanged Geranium with only a pair of small bites.

Defense, of course, was his strongest subject. The only moment of uncertainty came when the aged Tofty asked if he might be able to see Harry's Patronus. It had been some time since Harry had cast that spell, and the last time he had, an enormous silver asp had emerged. Summoning a happy memory that was not somehow compromised by the events of this year proved to be a challenge as well. He focused hard on his utter joy at gaining a friend in Hermione during his first year, gently flicked his wrist, and spoke the words, "Expecto Patronum."

At first, there was no clear shape, and then, abruptly - and somewhat to his surprise - the gaseous cloud of magic coalesced into a hulking grey wolf with a long snout and its tail up in an expression of dominance, which bounded about the room as Harry did his best to act unworried. Where had that come from? One's Patronus could

take many forms, frequently an animal associated with one close to the spell-caster's heart. His father had been a stag animagus, Sirius a shaggy dog, he heard that Lily had a doe patronus, and he had never seen Daphne's, though he believe it was some sort of bird of prey - appropriate with Artemis as a middle name.

As Tofty applauded enthusiastically, Harry pondered what this could mean, if anything. Wolves are pack animals, territorial, dangerous when roused, and possessed of great cunning and deception according to a variety of folk traditions...

"I am very impressed, Mr. Potter. Many tales have been told of your abilities, each of them likely taller and more absurd as they go, but I have never seen one your age cast such a successful patronus. Does the shape it takes have a particular importance to you? I do not mean to pry, of course."

"I'm not entirely sure."

Tofty blinked at that, and then nodded smugly, suggesting that he suspected Harry was indeed hiding something. "Ah hah. Well then, you have been a pleasure to work with, Mr. Potter. Good luck on the reminder of your examinations."

Harry was still catching his breath with he called a halt to the latest meeting of the Hogwarts Defense Association. For the first time in a while, he had participated in some duels after spending time showing the younger students how to cast and hold Shielding Spells against a mild barrage of Striking Curses. It was somewhat encouraging. Any witch or wizard that had a chance to repel or at least reduce a hostile spell had a much higher chance of survival.

He had then announced that he would be taking challengers. Today offered a brief respite from the never-ending parade of O.W.L.'s and other classwork that had put a stranglehold on his existence for the past week. He was not above the urge to beat something (or someone) up to get a little of the tension out. He had to be careful, of course. Though his magic was slowly coming under his control, even without his emotions involved his grasp would slip, and a spell would emerge from his wand over, or under, powered. He focused on the

meditation exercises that Dumbledore had shown him, letting the anxiety and stress of his situation roll off him as he focused entirely on the matter at hand.

After rather easily besting Dean Thomas and Terry Boot, he had fought a much more challenging contest with the very well-trained Fourth year Zacharias Smith, who had openly challenged Harry as he was helping Terry off the ground. The surprise was that it hadn't happened sooner. Zacharias was the scion of Alexander Smith, one of Scrimgeour's most important allies in the Ministry, and a key figure in the Light families, who would generally be less organized and connected than their Dark counterparts.

Zacharias had been the beneficiary of personal training by an ex-Auror tutor since he was eleven (just like Harry), and it showed. Smith danced around Harry's opening blows, winging him with a Cutting Hex to end the first phase of their battle. Harry had pulled back, allowing the younger Hufflepuff to wear himself out trying to break Harry's shield. As arrogant as he was capable, Zacharias had taken the bait, and became visibly frustrated by his inability to get past Harry's defenses after his initial success. He soon overextended himself, and Harry sent him sprawling. Smith refused the Slytherin's offered hand. Harry sighed. Alexander was a reasonable man, but it seemed his eldest son had a bit of maturation left to accomplish.

It was then that Benjamin Sinclair, a quiet but respected Gryffindor a year ahead of Harry, had calmly suggested that they should match wands. Harry, suffering from increasingly chronic sleep deprivation and mental exhaustion due to his exams and his work with Dumbledore, had only reluctantly agreed. It was stupid, perhaps, but he refused to allow one of his erstwhile pupils to get the best of him that easily.

Sinclair was a few inches taller than Harry, lean and hard-featured, with a mop of straw-blond hair and fearless hazel eyes. They bowed, and the duel began. Four minutes later, Harry had to frantically overpower Ben's shield just to earn himself a respite from the Gryffindor's erratic but aggressive attacks. Unlike his previous opponent, Sinclair was being careful not to exhaust himself, although when he thought he saw a weakness, he hammered at it relentlessly.

Harry's victory came when he let his shield weaken visibly, then sidestepped a flurry of hexes and hit the Gryffindor right under his guard, ruining his balance with a Numbing Hex to the left knee, and finishing him with a powerful Disarming Spell that blew him off his feet.

Harry had bent over, hands on knees, sweat dripping down his forehead. When he looked up, the Gryffindor was smiling. "That was a hell of a duel, Potter. You won by trickery, as you Slytherins are wont, but you won nonetheless. Well fought."

"Well fought," Harry gasped, taking his hand. "You almost had me."

"I know," he said with a smile. "Maybe next time." He turned to go, then stopped. "By the way, Potter, I will make sure that my father hears of this. I assure you he'll be pleased; he's been hoping for somebody without years of combat experience to knock me on my arse for years now. Now that I know the bitter sting of defeat, I'll do my best to prevent it happening again."

"Glad I could be of service."

"Even you Slytherins are useful once in a while. Until next time, Potter."

Hermione came over to him as the rest of the D.A. was leaving, most of the fifth years moaning about their upcoming exams and their lack of preparedness. Hermione herself had spent most of her time reading over notes, though she had fought and lost a duel with Susan Bones, who had some of the nastiest physical curses (Striking, Hurling, and Bludgeoning, among others) that he had seen yet. The tall auburn-haired girl was quiet most of the time, and had been all the more so since her aunt had been arrested. Even though Amelia Bones was now Scrimgeour's right-hand woman in addition to being Head of the Department for Magical Law Enforcement, her niece had yet to fully regain the energy and vivacity she once had. Harry sympathized with Susan, as he too had had his world fall down around him before. In fact, although he wouldn't admit it to himself, he envied the Hufflepuff. At least her world only collapsed once; it seemed as if Harry's crumbled monthly.

"So what was that about?" Hermione asked, as she slung her bookbag over her shoulder.

Harry smiled tiredly. "It might have been nothing. Or I might have just impressed the heir of one of the oldest and most powerful Light families in the whole of Scotland."

"That's good news, is it?"

"I'd think so," Harry said, knowing that Hermione was only half-joking. She didn't like his political games any more than his continued insistence on creating his own inner circle of students and closest adult allies. Ben Sinclair might have to be added to that list, he mused. And Zacharias, unfortunately. It depended on how visible this cadre, that Harry had tentatively named his 'Shadow Guard,' would end up being.

It was then that he noticed another possible member of that group lingering in the corner. Hermione noticed her too, and, with only the slightest hint of a scowl, excused herself.

Daphne Greengrass moved to stand before him before Hermione was even out the door. "To what do I owe this honor?" he asked, still breathing a bit raggedly.

It was then he noticed something he had thought impossible. Daphne's pale blue eyes glistened with unshed tears, and her mouth was held in a painfully firm line. "Daphne, are you alright?"

Daphne's almost silver-blond hair was tied into a severe bun above her neck. Her skin was pale, and though it was barely perceptible, her petite hands were shaking ever so slightly. "No, not really. Of course, I so rarely am these days."

Harry's blood ran cold. "Has something happened to your father?" Aiden's loss could be absolutely crippling. He was the glue that held the unholy alliance of a handful of important Dark families and Scrimgeour's ministry together. Without him...well, Harry had only met a few of his other erstwhile allies, and he did not like his chance of swaying the likes of Grigory Ivanov or Lucretia Bulstrode without

considerable help. He'd probably still have Edwin Burke, but Harry wasn't sure he even wanted the support of the borderline psychotic ex-Death Eater.

He'd gotten a Christmas present from him this year: a mummified finger. The note said it belonged to one of his ancestors, and was a well-used good luck charm that no Burke had ever been killed carrying. With Hermione's all-too-understandably reluctant help, he had come to the unsettling realization that whoever it had belonged to, they had still been alive when it was cut off. That object rested in the depths of his trunk, and would probably never see the light of day if Harry had anything to say about it. Remus had advised him to burn it. Harry had declined to send a body part in return. He'd sent the daggers from the room of Regulus Black that had tried to kill him earlier that year. Sirius had seemed surprisingly remiss, but ultimately, he had consented. Kreacher had thrown a fit.

To be fair, he probably also had the support of Edwin's younger brother Gavin, who had married a Light witch named Gwendolin O'Leary. Those two were rather more desirable as allies.

"Not yet," Greengrass said, her voice hard. "But several men tried to breach the wards of our safe-house two days ago, and nearly succeeded. My father is a target, Potter, and it is your fault."

"I'm sorry to be exposing him to harm, but I cannot do this without him, and he pledged his support freely."

Daphne seemed to swallow a laugh. "For now. Potter, I'm going to be blunt with you, even though I rarely have been in the past. Because of my father's actions, you have become the second most important person in my life, very much against my wishes. I think you're a fool sometimes, Potter, and sooner or later you are going to trust the wrong person, make one assumption to many, and get all of us killed."

At this point, Harry lacked the energy to lash out in response. And a part of him rather agreed with her assessment. He simply nodded.

Daphne seemed to respect that, strangely enough. "I want to be your friend."

Harry blinked. "Excuse me?"

"I'm pretty certain you heard me, Potter. If my life and the life of my father are tied to your fate, I will not stand in the shadows and watch you foul things up. If you'll have me, I'll sit with you at meals, be polite as I can manage to your Gryffindors, and maybe, just maybe, we might come to like one another." She smiled oddly at the last part.

"Only in Slytherin would such a desire be communicated by a formal request."

"Well, we are in Slytherin, in case you hadn't noticed," Daphne said needlessly. "Pot...Harry," she said, trying out the name, "I don't open up to many people. Well, no one, really. Not even Theodore, not beyond how I'm feeling on a day-to-day basis. My father has misgivings about him, due to his family, though I've repeatedly assured him that Theodore has not chosen his side, and is reasonable enough to listen."

As opposed to, say, being a good person, a cynical part of Harry's mind whispered. He didn't dare vocalize the thought.

"Daphne," he said, returning the favor. The name tasted strange on his lips. But the young woman before him was most certainly not his guardian. "I see no reason why you couldn't. I should warn you that my friends might not be so receptive."

"I will deal with them," she said confidently. "I've dealt with you all this time, haven't I?"

Harry had to laugh a bit at that. "Yes, I suppose you have. Though I would warn you, I don't keep them around because they echo my thoughts."

Daphne shrugged. "You've been skiving your Prefect duties, Potter."

"I have other things on my mind."

"As do I," she said, tipping her head up and looking down at him. "I still do my duty."

"No one is perfect."

"Least of all you."

Harry stared at her. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

Daphne smiled crookedly. "I thought I would take on a new challenge – getting to know the Boy-Who-Lived without driving my wand through his eye." Her expression turned more serious. Harry had seen Slytherin's ice princess express a wider range of emotion in the past five minutes than in the five years he had known her, combined.

His surprise must have shown. "I do have feelings, you know," she said sharply.

"It is easy to forget."

Her smile was a bit predatory. "I'm pleased to hear that."

He sighed, gathering himself. "I won't betray your trust, Daphne. I try to be a good friend to those that treat me well."

Daphne stared at him for a long, hard moment. "Who said anything about trust, Harry?"

A/N: Hey look, I'm back! After another really lengthy delay, I know, and I am sorry about that, unfortunately neither my life nor my creativity tends to run on a decent schedule.

This is the final set-up chapter before what is going to be a two-part finale and then an epilogue. Everything has been building, more slowly in some areas, true, but all directed toward what is about to happen. It won't be an enormous diversion from the canon, at least in terms of events, but the how, why, and what will all differ rather greatly, and at the end will be a revelation that ought to make it clear,

both to you, my audience, and the very characters themselves, that fate has set a rather different game than the one they were expecting.

What it comes down to is that a single event, at the end of Slytherin's Heir, changed everything. Something that was not 'supposed' to happen, and has had a chain reaction of consequences and implications that have gone a long way towards making Harry's journey different from that which Rowling wrote.

And remember, for you Who fans out there, I'm rather a fan of Steven Moffat. We saw the implications of time-travel explored canonically in PoA. I might bend Jo's rules a bit, but I've always thought that non-linear time and cause and effect was absolutely fascinating, and could not resist the urge to add it to this massive undertaking of mine. So we'll see how that goes.

A few very important little moments in this chapter, setting up relationships that will be key as the story progresses. It's my hope that Luna's character is becoming more clear, or, at least, that Harry's perception of Luna's character is becoming more clear. It's a fine line to play with between God/Suehood and making Luna different in powerful and important ways. Obviously her mental abilities are not canon, though they were certainly inspired by Luna's terrific powers of observation and wisdom in human affairs (of others more so than her own). It all has a purpose.

Given that Harry has observed or experienced feelings for or from a number of women (and quite possibly one man) at this point, it seems like a good idea to address the always-lurking question of shipping. Right now, there is one pairing that matters in Harry's mind: himself and Ginny. That doesn't mean they are going to be together throughout even the majority of the remainder of this story, it just means that right now, that's with whom Harry's heart lies, and likewise for Ginevra. I do end up ship-teasing rather a lot, which is occasionally intentional, but not always. The reason so many of Harry's peers are captivated by him is plot and story based, and it would do well to think back to how Remus reacted when he first learned of Harry's ability. In any case, the 'Harry has a lot of girls (and guys) chasing him' thing will be explored and addressed further. And not all attention is good attention.

It's also possible that Harry completely and utterly missed what Luna was trying to say. But he's not the perfect observer of others, as much as he likes to think otherwise.

The next chapter (In Harm's Way, Part I) gets the action going again, laying the final pieces of the groundwork for the climax and then getting it started. The second is intended and written to be one of the most gut-wrenching and devastating series of events ever to befall Harry and his companions, one in particular. It's still being worked out, but the most horrific part of it has been written, and I'm not afraid to say I somewhat disturbed myself with what my mind was capable of imagining and writing. Really, only one word is required: Bellatrix.

It's dark. It's also dealing with some rather terrible themes, so there will be a trigger warning at the start of part II. But I feel that I need to go here, because if things are going to be at all realistic, certain characters need to be thoroughly and terribly broken.

War is hell. And Harry and his friends are about to discover that in some of the most horrific ways imaginable. One of them, who thinks they have seen it all, is going to realize the error of that assumption.

...so, you've got that to look forward to.

Until next time,

-Chris Widger

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